

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 10: AFFECTIONS

Matthew 27:1-5, Mark 12:30, 1 Peter 1:8, John 12:1-8 (NASB)

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Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus Christ to his executioners, was filled by what he had done with a most intense feeling of remorse. To what end did his feeling lead him?

In our last study we saw that believers in Jesus Christ must avoid extremes in the relationship between faith and the emotions, or affections, as Jonathan Edwards called them. Emotions can be defined as the excitement of feelings. Affections can be defined as a bent of mind, or a natural impulse acting upon and swaying the mind. The distinction is that the term "affections" more clearly emphasizes thoughtfulness, intentionality, and the action which a feeling brings about. This is a meaningful distinction. Sometimes emotions are a brainless dead end which lead to no effective actions of any kind, and may actually defeat them. Affections, as a rule, lead to action. Notice that there is no bias in the words themselves to say whether the feelings or actions are good or bad. We might feel love for killing cats, a piece of chocolate cake, or for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many Christians in the modern era have subscribed to the famous "fact, faith, and feeling train" as the correct solution to the place of our troublesome emotions. Picture in your mind a short train with an engine which represents the facts of Christ, a middle car which represents faith in Christ based on those facts, and a caboose which represents our feelings for Christ which arise from fact-based faith. This was a good corrective image for a generation which was increasingly living by feelings. The foundation of our faith is surely the historical facts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the decision of faith is certainly based upon those facts, and our emotions are shaped by those facts. This is far better than pretending that our emotions do not exist, and also better than simply following our emotions into all sorts of damaging behaviors.

THE DECEPTIVENESS OF EMOTIONS

And yet the modern era has given way to the postmodern era, and the majority of people are indeed following their feelings in the matter of faith. The modern era said: "I'll believe it when I understand it" but the postmodern era says: "I'll believe it when I experience it—when I feel it" Many churches have turned to the manufacturing of experiences to attract and retain people. Denominational distinctions based on details of theology broke down first. Now we discover that many of the main truths of the faith have been blown away in the winds of postmodernism. How many Presbyterians could explain Calvin's teaching on redemptive grace? How many of us could explain A. B. Simpson's teaching on the unity of the body of Christ? A Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey in 2008 revealed that about half the people who attend evangelical churches do not believe that Christ is the only way to eternal life. A large percentage of people have come to choose churches based on how they feel about the building, the friendliness, the music, the decor, the vibe, and sheer convenience.

Judas Iscariot is a powerful example of how emotions can be divorced from truth and even counter to truth. Judas obviously felt it necessary to betray Christ to the Jewish authorities, but when he realized what was going to happen to Christ his feelings changed, as Matthew's gospel tells us: "**Now**

when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to that yourself!' And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:1-5).

This is a case study in the affections, specifically remorse. At this same time Peter also betrayed the Lord--three times!--and was overcome with remorse. What was the difference between Peter's remorse and Judas' remorse? Peter's emotion led to repentance and Judas' emotion led to suicide, virtually opposite outcomes. This is evidence that emotions are utterly inadequate as a guide to behavior. As sympathetic as we might be for Judas' sorrow for betraying the Lord, Judas' final act in life was to slap the face of the God who gave him life.

I must confess that I find it hard not to be convinced that someone is on the right track when he or she feels remorse for wrongdoing. Isn't feeling sorry enough to prove that the person is moving toward God? No. Remorse is a good first step, but Judas' life and death prove that remorse does not automatically lead to godly repentance. That is true even for a believer. We can be very sorry for our sins, even admitting them as Judas did, and still be bent on having our own way.

HOLY AFFECTIONS

So while we cannot affirm the idea of the caboose of feelings pulling the train of faith, is it true that we can have saving faith as a pure act of the will without emotion of any kind? Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest theologian of American history, wrote a book to answer that question called *Treatise on Religious Affections*. The book is now in the public domain and can be read on line for free. In short, he wrote: "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections" (quoted in "Sweet Sorrow: the Happy Root of Holy Living," article, John Piper, www.desiringGod.org, p. 3).

It is, of course, one thing for Jonathan Edwards to say it, but does the word of God teach it? Christ himself quoted the Old Testament Bible when he was asked what is the greatest commandment of God: "**...AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH**" (Mark 12:30, caps in original). The highest thing on God's mind for the true believer is that we love him--an affection--with every part of our beings.

The "**heart**" is a reference to the spiritual side of the immaterial nature in this context. It differentiates us from animals. The "**soul**" is our earthly life force when distinguished from heart and mind, as it is here. It is the seat of the emotions and all of the impulses which promote life such as hunger, thirst, and the need for sleep. The "**mind**" is obviously the intellect, and may include the will. "**Strength**" is a reference to the applied intentions, the things to which we put our energies. So love for God is an affection--the master affection, according to Edwards--which directs our whole persons.

The Apostle Peter affirmed this. In referring to the fruit of faith which is tested by trials, he wrote that love, faith, and rejoicing are actually inseparable: "**...And though you have not seen Him,**

you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory..." (1 Peter 1:8). This is why Edwards argued that there is no true faith without powerful affections. The "fact, faith, and feeling train" is actually comprised of two cars instead of three. Fact is the engine but the second car represents faith and affections bonded together. You can see that fact--the truth of Christ--still pulls the train. Edwards made it clear that if emotions are the excitement of feelings it is truth which must do the exciting, specifically the word of God. This is the only way for the affections to be godly. Of course, there are many ways to stimulate the emotions which do not lead to godliness.

For those who may be afraid of the power of the affections, the apostles were clear that no one is at the mercy of his or her emotions. On the negative side, we are commanded to put away destructive emotions, as Paul wrote to the Colossians: **"But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth"** (Colossians 3:8). Believers are commanded not merely to experience their emotions, but to take affirmative control of them. While on the one hand we put aside the bad ones, we are commanded to embrace the positive ones, as Paul wrote to the Philippians: **"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"** (Philippians 4:4). This command to rejoice is still incumbent upon us even when we are experiencing great suffering, as Peter wrote: **"...But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation"** (1 Peter 4:13).

I must confess that for a long time as a Christian I found the Lord's command to rejoice even in the face of sufferings to be unfair. It seemed that following Christ naturally brought me into sorrows of various kinds. Am I a failure when I feel sad that more people do not turn to Christ? Am I being asked to manufacture joy which I do not have? Those questions drove me to study God's word to figure out how God could command such a thing without turning us all into either failures or fakers. Peter's version of the command to keep on rejoicing contains the seed concept which explains it all, a concept which captivated Jonathan Edwards many years ago and which came to captivate John Piper.

JOY ONLY FOUND IN GOD

Paul gave the bullet-point version of the answer to the dilemma: **"Rejoice!"** How? **"In the Lord..."** Believers are not commanded to be hypocrites or to try to jinn up emotions which they do not have, but to set their affections on the Lord Jesus who is always an authentic reason for rejoicing. Peter refined the idea by connecting the rejoicing of the believer to **"the revelation of His glory."** Knowing that Christ will return for everyone who trusts in him, riding on the wings of the sky with great glory, is a compelling reason to rejoice all the time. But the concept of rejoicing at Christ's glory goes farther than that. There is an elemental connection between the affections of the believer and the enduring decision to gaze upon the perfections of Christ as a way of life.

John Piper wrote: "What this means is that the battle for joy--that is, the battle to delight in God above all other things, the battle to be satisfied in God above all competing satisfactions in the universe--is the main battle of the universe" (Piper, p. 4). We know that the spiritual war of all time began when Lucifer chose not to find his delight in the glories of God, but set his affections on the attainment of his own glories. With this a world fell. Mankind, by setting its affections on the attainment of the knowledge of both good and evil—it could have been anything other than God--fell with him. The battle to delight in God above all other things is the main battle of the universe. We must fight this

battle every day.

MARY VERSUS JUDAS, A STUDY IN THE AFFECTIONS

The Apostle John recorded a second dramatic case study in the affections in his twelfth chapter, where Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who had recently been raised from the dead, encountered Jesus: **"Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?' Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, 'Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me'"** (John 12:1-8).

Nothing in the soul of Judas resonated with Mary's sacrificial devotion. She is a shining example of having the entire faith train running down the tracks of a human soul. She had set her affections on Jesus Christ in accordance with the truth by faith. As all true affections for God do, they bore fruit in her act of selfless devotion.

Judas, on the other hand, found his unhealthy soul filled with negative emotions which caused him to openly denigrate her. Pay careful attention to him, since you or I may arrive on either side of this situation. On one day, we may be the one offering selfless devotion to Christ out of joy, and find that there are people standing by to criticize us. On another day we may have so failed to let the truth of God cleanse our souls that we are the ones criticizing someone else's act of devotion.

Judas' refusal to set his affections on the glory of Christ had several consequences. He had a boundary problem. What Mary did with her own property was none of his business, but his greed confused the truth for him. I have known Christians who have no idea when they are poaching on other people's personal business. Notice that Judas attempted to cover his greed with an appeal to a good thing: concern for the poor. Does this sound familiar? Judas did not have concern for the poor. His true inner affection was for money, and he was a flaming hypocrite about it. He did not even notice, at this point, that his soul was desperately sick.

To the extent that we deny our true feelings and do not submit them to the Lord we are like Judas and not Mary. Mary, in a completely unartful way, rejoiced in devotion to the glory of God. Judas, while ignoring the glory of God set right before him, rejoiced in his selfish desires. That he was an expert at faking devotion is proved by the fact that even after three years the disciples did not guess which one of them would betray Jesus.

In what do you take your joy? To where does your remorse lead? Let us set aside all faking, choose to take affirmative control of our affections, set them on the glory of God, and love the Lord Jesus with all that is within us. May the authentic faith train run pell-mell down the tracks of our souls.

[clip from *The Passion of the Christ* DVD, Judas returns the blood money, 0:31:42 to 0:32:38]