

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 9: EMOTIONS

Luke 10:38-42, 2 Timothy 3:6-7, 1 Peter 1:22-23 (NASB)

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The 1994 film Warner Brothers film, *Wyatt Earp*, starring Kevin Costner tells the life story of the famous lawman from the American West. Even during his lifetime Earp had become a legend. We know him as the man associated with Bat Masterson and Doc Holliday. We know about the showdown at the OK Corral. Yet few know of his beginnings.

Earp's father was a judge in Missouri. He was a man of uncompromising principle, and wanted Wyatt to follow in his footsteps. After some time away from home Wyatt came back and met a young woman named Urilla for whom he fell as hard as a man can fall. After a suitable time of courtship they married, settled into a lovely cottage, and Earp began to study law. They were deliriously happy together.

And then Urilla fell ill. She lay on her bed for days in a fever, moaning and dripping with sweat. Wyatt sat by his beloved and swabbed her with damp cloths in a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable. In the end, typhoid claimed Earp's lovely wife and the unborn child in her womb.

Earp was inconsolable. He played along with the social convention of a funeral, but even before the pastor spoke his final words Earp was off to drown himself in alcohol. That very night, as he leaned against the whitewashed fence around his yard in the dark and drank himself stupid, he made a fateful decision. Something in his gut told him he could never go in that house again. So he took his bottle of high-proof liquor, stuffed a rag into the mouth, lit it afire, and hurled it through the front window of his home. The house burned furiously and was completely engulfed within moments. Then Earp jumped on his horse and rode away to spend the next year as a shiftless drunk, sleeping in barns and under trees. Because of his feelings, he had decisively repudiated his future career, his family, his community, and his own home and possessions.

YELLING AT JESUS

Have you ever been so messed up emotionally that you wanted to yell at your loved ones? Ever been so emotionally unhealthy that you found yourself wanting to yell at Jesus himself? A woman named Martha did. Luke told her story: **"Now as [the disciples] were traveling along, [Jesus] entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her'"** (Luke 10:38-42). How do we know that Martha's emotions were messed up? Jesus said so. He said she was **"worried and bothered."**

There are three roads we can take with regard to our emotions. We can neglect and minimize our emotions, we can elevate our emotions into our rule of life, or we can embrace the transformation of our emotions through the work of Jesus Christ in our lives.

NEGLECTING THE VALID ROLE OF EMOTIONS

Peter Scazzero, in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2006, p. 24), writes about the top ten symptoms of an emotionally unhealthy pattern of life. Martha had at least four of these. As she worked to welcome the disciples into her home, she displayed the first one: "living without limits," meaning that she was taking the entire responsibility upon herself. Instead of thinking of Mary's responsibilities as Mary's own, Martha thought of all them as hers. That's why she was so frustrated with Mary. I have seen pastors and directors of parachurch ministries who thought it was their personal job to save the world. The problem is that the world will not be saved by any human being, and this logic leads to overwork and worry without limits.

Secondly, Martha was "doing for God instead of being with God," which is the main point of Luke's story. This is a variety of man-pleasing, where we think of God as just another person whom we must please. How much do you have to do to please God? This unhealthy idea leads to a never-ending attempt to do the impossible and keeps us from the sweet relationship with Christ which feeds and restores our souls.

Thirdly, Martha was also "ignoring the emotions of anger, sadness, and fear." Why do I think this? Martha was no doubt scurrying around in a tizzy getting things ready for Jesus and the disciples, concealing her underlying fears about being a poor hostess. She seems not to have shared these concerns with Mary, and the moment Mary went off Martha's script Martha found herself barking foolish statements at the Son of God. Have you ever pretended that you were not having certain emotions? They will eventually out, and it will usually not be pretty.

The fourth item on Pete Scazzero's list is that Martha was clearly judging Mary's spiritual journey. Martha apparently believed that getting things done was how one should go about loving God, while Mary had a different take on it. Martha's evaluation of Mary's personal devotion was that it was a waste—at least at that moment. Watch out when you begin to think that other believers in Christ are pursuing God in ways that are worthless.

Neglecting the valid role of emotions in this way leads to attempts to use other people to achieve our goals, it leads to uncontrolled outbursts of negative emotion, and it leads to, as Scazzero writes, "havoc in our personal lives and in our churches." Jesus Christ was a man of sorrows who wept openly at times, so it's OK for us to do that. He also promised those who believe in him that our sorrow would be turned to joy as we trust in him. Emotions have a valid place in the life of faith, and we must not neglect them.

ELEVATING EMOTIONS TO A RULE OF LIFE

On the other side of the scale from neglecting our valid emotions is the possibility that we may elevate our emotions into a rule of life. In the postmodern world many people, having nothing better by which to guide their lives, are willing to follow their feelings even into grave personal damage. Take

abortion as a piercing example. Most abortions today are performed on people who do not feel like using any birth control methods. Once the woman is pregnant, many who choose abortion do so because, in the middle of the most prosperous society in world history, they do not feel that they can handle having a child. But if the child is born, very few women in crisis pregnancies who should give their child up for adoption do so because their feelings for the child become so strong. For many years I did not understand the statistics of abortion and adoption, but you can see that they are explained by the fact that at every decision point in the process most Americans are following their feelings--at least whatever they are at the moment. Thus we wreck our lives.

Living that way also makes us vulnerable to anyone who wants to manipulate us. Paul warned Pastor Timothy to look out for this scenario in the church, especially people who hold to a form of godliness but deny its power: **"For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"** (2 Timothy 3:6-7). Paul warns us against wolves in sheep's clothing who target weak or idle women, intrude in their homes, and captivate them with false teaching. Obviously this is a scenario which can play out with either sex.

What is it about the vulnerable Christians which makes them so? They are people who are **"led on by various impulses,"** also called "lusts" or "passions" in other translations. People who follow their feelings are in grave danger. I can't tell you how many times I hear Christians say that their feelings will not allow them to obey Christ in some area or their feelings about something prevent them from serving Christ.

Be very afraid of the anger of God when you decide that you are going to refuse to use your gift in ministry as long as so-and-so is on such-and-such a committee. Be very afraid when your fears keep you from giving to the Lord, or your feeling of busyness keeps you out of worship. Or, perhaps worse, be very afraid of the Lord's discipline when your loneliness becomes an excuse to do inappropriate things in relationships. Using emotions as a rule of life always dishonors the Lord and often leads to catastrophe.

EMOTIONS TRANSFORMED BY CHRIST

The third way we can choose to handle our emotions is to bring them to Christ for transformation. We will not find health for our souls either by denying them or by following them. Both extremes are naive and fail to account for how powerful and how fallen our emotions are. The path to a healthy soul must bring us to admit the truth of our emotions, both good and bad, and submit them to Christ for cleansing and transformation. The Apostle Peter digs into the heart of the issue in his first letter. Speaking of those who have come to faith in the resurrected Christ, he wrote: **"Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God"** (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Fervency of love is not valuable from a fallen soul until our souls have been purified. When we receive Christ we receive the gift of life, so our emotions can begin to respond to truth and life instead of darkness and death. But as in all gifts of God which we have by faith, we must walk in that faith. Specifically, we move into purified emotions **"through the living and enduring word of God."** The

Apostle Paul spoke of this in the letter to the Ephesians, where he describes the work of Christ in his church to bring this about: **"...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word..."** (Ephesians 5:25b-26).

Our emotions are self-fouling, kind of like the windshield on my motorcycle. Every time I ride it the windshield gets splattered with bugs. I get out the special cleaner and carefully buff off the goo. It usually takes several tries to get it clean. Then, after the next ride, I have to do it all over again. We all get purified emotions the day we are saved, but very soon they become fouled. We need to go every day to the word of God to wash off the splatters. And we have all seen what happens when Christians, even those who have walked with the Lord for many years, stop this process of purifying the emotions for a healthy soul. Let more than a few years go by like this and they can end up in the dark where they began. Because their windshield is splattered, they do not see anything the way it really is. Everything looks befouled to them, and their emotions reflect an unhealthy soul.

John the Apostle dealt with this problem when he wrote: **"The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes"** (1 John 2:9-11). It has taken me many years of ministry to finally admit that I have known people in every church where I have been who are faithful to the services of the church, they give sacrificially, they serve in many ways, they help people in need--and they hate people, even other Christians! No matter how much I love and serve them, their windshield is so splattered that no light can get in.

It is only this **"washing of water with the word"** which keeps any of us from falling into the same darkness. The daily washing of our secret souls cleanses our emotions so we can love one another fervently. Peter says specifically that it makes us **"sincere,"** a Greek word which literally means "unhypocritical." No more saying we love God but allowing ourselves to hate certain members of God's church, or people of different races, or people of different political persuasions. When we continually purify our emotions through the word of God, we find out who God really meant us to be. We find our true selves.

The writer to the Hebrews may have scared some people when he wrote about just how revealing and powerful the word of God is when we take it into our souls: **"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"** (Hebrews 4:12). The word of God is the tool we use to bring health to our emotions.

But it only works when it is combined with a submissive spirit. Scott Stapp was the founder and lead singer of the rock band known as Creed. Stapp was raised in a Christian home, but ran away to do his own thing. The Christian teaching in his heart and mind led him to use Christian themes in many of his songs, and he sold many recordings to Christians. A careful look at those lyrics reveals no clear idea of God or Christ, and massive internal confusion on his part. And while he was becoming a multi-millionaire singing quasi-Christian songs he was lost in drug and alcohol abuse and became infamous among other musicians for hating people.

His band blew apart, his short marriage blew apart, and his life blew apart. Then in 2004 Stapp encountered the film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Here is how it affected him, in his own words: "When I was a kid, and even as a young adult, I was always asking God to prove himself to me. After seeing *The Passion* it was kind of like God saying to me, 'I'm here, what further proof do you need?' I finally got to that place where I looked up to God and said, 'You can have me; you can have everything I've got, if you'll just take me back'" (www.crossrhythms.co.uk).

I'm not sure how his new-found faith is doing today. But I know this for sure: his expressed willingness to submit his life to Christ for real is the only possible way he could ever stop being "the drunken Christian singer who hates people." This submission is the only way any of us can purify our souls from false and damaging emotions.

One of the sad truths expressed by the Wyatt Earp film is that Earp's spectacular failure to find a way to cleanse his poisonous emotions after the loss of his wife twisted everything he tried to do from that point forward. Have you had emotions so strong and so apparently true that you wanted to burn down the house like Earp or yell at Jesus like Martha--maybe even right now? If so, you are in the red zone and your life and future are in peril. These emotions, if yielded to, will inevitably influence you to move away from Christ.

Whatever your level of emotional distress may be, we all have one solution: Go to Jesus and plead for help! He's the only one who can. Confess every sin you can think of. Rinse out the befouled things in your soul by reading and studying the word of God daily. I must, and I know that I am not different from everyone else. God's word brings a sweetness to our souls we cannot get any other way when coupled with willing submission to him. Pray a prayer like the one Scott Stapp prayed: "Lord, you can have me; you can have everything I've got—even my emotions." This is the sole path to inward change for a believer in Christ, a transformation process that will finally put our emotions in the place God meant them to be.