

## Sermon for Sunday, May 6, 2012

Dr. Dan Doriani

Caring for our Emotions

Prov 4:23 and Gal 5:19-23

*Prov. 4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*

*Gal. 5:19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

### 1. Our emotions reflect the status of our heart (Proverbs 4:23)

The Tuesday staff meeting typically began with a few minutes of recognition for jobs well done. One day Jason squirmed as his colleagues heaped praise on Michael. Jason and Michael had been hired the same week. They were friendly rivals, but there was no reason to be upset. Last week Michael learned that his father had cancer; everyone wanted to support him. Jason knew this, yet as people went on and on about Michael, Jason's anger surged. Ten minutes later, he blew up. It looked like a new topic, but Jason knew.

Jason might ask, "Why am I so emotional?" He could tell himself, "Don't be so emotional." But there is no mystery here. Jason's gods were under attack: his self-worth, his sense of competence, his hopes for his career. Maybe it wasn't rational, under the circumstances, but it's no wonder that he got upset. It was a heart issue.

This scene reminds us that our emotions are fallen, flawed, often sinful. We can't control them. Healthy emotions are a gift – a gift from God ultimately. In that way emotions are like all our faculties: a healthy mind, will and spirit are all God's gifts.

#### What emotions are?

Emotions are heart-driven responses to events, words or deeds that feel important to us. Emotions rouse the whole person, mind and body. Emotions are a window to the heart. They express "the inner workings of our soul."<sup>1</sup>

Emotions come over us, but they don't *simply* come over us. They arise from our core values and reflect our heart condition. They reveal what matters to us. That's why we can't change our feelings at will, on command. Instead of trying to change our emotions at once, we should first listen and hear what

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<sup>1</sup> Allender, Cry 14-15.

they are saying about us. Like our words, our emotions flow from our heart.<sup>2</sup>

Strong emotions change us. If we see a funnel cloud, we focus on nothing, our heart beats strong and fast. We're ready to act, to move wherever we must go.

Solomon says there is a time for each emotion - "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance... a time to embrace and a time to refrain [from embracing]... a time to love and a time to hate" (Eccles 3:4-5, 8).

The "time" depends on the way we construe the situation. Suppose someone rushes at you with a sword shouting. Our response depends on how we construe the situation. If it's a stranger on a city street in Cairo, fear. If it's our three-year-old nephew, in play, we laugh. If we're on stage, ready for our big line we may feel apprehension.

Academics might consider the thesis review or defense. If we have doubts, we feel tense. If we fail, we're crushed. If we pass, we're relieved. If we're praised, we're joyful, even euphoric – all because we care so much. Our respect or our work, which may be our gods, are at stake, so emotions run strong.

### **When and where emotions surface**

Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Our emotions come over us, but they don't simply come over us. They come from the heart. Suppose your team loses a big game. If you're devastated, listen to your emotions. Ask: Why am I so upset? Probably because the team takes up too much space in your heart. You should ask yourself, "Are the right things in the center of my life?"

Evil emotions, like evil desires, come from an evil heart. When the Pharisees slandered Jesus, he explained, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks... out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder... slander" (Matt 12:34, 15:19).

### **Why emotions run strong**

James 4 says, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You can't have what you want [so] you quarrel and fight."

Emotions are a window to the soul. Perhaps you recall that Jacob the patriarch had two wives, Rachel and Leah. Jacob had more affection for Rachel, but Rachel was barren, while the second wife Leah gave him children. Genesis says Rachel "became jealous of her sister" (emotion). Then she told Jacob, "'Give me children, or I'll die!' Jacob became angry (emotion) with her and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?'" (Gen 30:1-2). False gods drive these negative emotions. Rachel's idol is her desire to meet her culture's ideal of a real woman. She wants children - a common idol.

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<sup>2</sup> Allender, 16-17

Respect and career are common idols too. I saw this in myself one day as a new professor. My class went three minutes over time. I was in my last sentence when a senior professor stuck his head in and called out, "Wrap it up! I've got a class in here." That bothered me – too much! He still had eight minutes! He could have stuck his head in and waved. He shamed me in front of my students! Blah, blah. He threatened my god, professional competence. But don't let these stories mislead you, because....

### **Emotions are God's gift.**

We tend to focus on emotions when they *go wrong*, but let's remember that *every faculty goes wrong due to sin*. A fallen mind rationalizes wicked acts. A fallen will does things just because it wants them. But mind, will and emotions are good in themselves and essential to our humanity.

Even our dark emotions are important. We prefer to avoid or shut off pain, shame and sorrow. "To feel hurt, hurts. To feel shame, shames".<sup>3</sup> But it's dangerous to stop feeling. We may become cool, indifferent, detached from ourselves.

We have emotions because God has emotions. Some say God can't really have emotions because the Bible says he doesn't change. It's true that God doesn't change. He says "I the Lord do not change" (Mal 3:6). The Lord does not "change his mind" (1 Sam. 15:29, Psa. 110:4). That means God has no shifting passions; he doesn't lose his temper or see something terrible and fall into a depression. But feelings? Yes.

God has **covenantal, concern-based construals**. *Covenantal* means God's emotions are faithful, stable and grounded in concern for his people. They don't shift or vary; they are consistent. When God sees evil he is not angry one time and blasé the next. He is *concerned*. "Construal" means God sees and evaluates all things. He knows how to read them, how to respond properly, faithfully.

Most important, he sees our sin, our inability, our fallenness and determines to redeem and restore us. The Father's compassion for his people led him to send Jesus to us. When the Lord enters covenants with his people, he rejoices: "The Lord ... will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing" (Zeph 3:17, cf. Rom. 16:19).

Further, he wants us to work out salvation, so our sin grieves God's Spirit (Eph 4:30). He is angry when his people run to idolatry (Ex 32). He grieved as Saul's ruinous kingship unfolded (1Sam 15:11). This steadfast concern is the model, the norm, for our emotional life. Our emotions should be covenantal, based on concern.

Perhaps you have heard of Joseph Kony, the infamous Ugandan war-lord. He is notorious for the rape, murder, and torture of enemies *and* ordinary people. He likes to capture children and make the boys into soldiers, the girls into slaves. In 1996, his army kidnapped 139 students from a Ugandan girls' school. A nun, Sister Rachele Fassera, pursued them through the jungle. When she caught up, she confronted 200

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<sup>3</sup> Allender, 21-27

gunmen and demanded that they release the girls. Somehow, she shamed them into releasing the great majority of the girls.<sup>4</sup>

Where did she get the courage to risk her life? She had God-like feelings. She had a covenant with these girls. She loves them. Knows what they could suffer. She acted because of faithful feelings, like God's.

By contrast, people who don't feel properly don't act properly. If Sister Fassera lacked emotional concern for her girls, she could not have acted so boldly. Through brain injuries, a few people have lost all their emotions. Scientists studying them find that people who have no emotions can't make decisions. The mind without the emotions analyzes endlessly. Once a researcher asked a man if he preferred 10 or 11 a.m. for his next appointment. He analyzed the pros and cons for about twenty minutes until the researcher finally stopped him and said, "Come at eleven."

No emotions means no attachment, no desire to act, to fulfill a duty or enjoy something. No fear means reckless, self-destructive activities. Healthy emotions let us desire what is good. We don't need to be less emotional, we need sound emotions and we need emotions and reason to work together to drive sound action.<sup>5</sup>

Things go wrong if we suppress our emotions. Just as things go wrong if we neglect our body or fail to exercise the will in self-discipline.

Some writers create the fictional character Don Draper. He's an advertising executive in the 1960s and he has a secret: His mother died in childbirth, his father hated him and beat him. As a teenager, he ran away and switched identities with another man in an effort to bury his past. Don has a protégé, Peggy, who did something foolish. The consequences triggered a breakdown and time in a mental hospital. Don visits her and tells her to do what he did.

Don: "Peggy, why are you here?"

Peggy, in a haze: "I don't know."

Don: "Yes, you do know. Now you need to do whatever they say and get out of here. Get out of here! Move forward. **This never happened.**"

"This never happened" lets Draper work hard and produce, but he is immature, angry, self-destructive. The writers hint that if he faced his past, he might grow up. Are the writers correct? The Bible corrects sinful emotions, but it never says we should close them down. The Bible tells us to discipline our bodies; to discipline the will by saying no to evil. And we must disciple our emotions, too.

I coped with a violent childhood by shutting down most negative emotions. Someone once showed me a list of negative emotions: Worry, anxiety, anguish, panic, worry, fear, jealousy, sorrow. I'd felt one-third of them, at most. When I finally felt them again, it was astonishing. When I felt a sorrow it hurt so much – in the middle of my chest! I told a friend; he said, "That's normal." News to me!

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<sup>4</sup> (Nickolas Kristof, New York Times).

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, *Social Animal* 19-20, 278-82.

God himself has emotions and gave them to us. When we try to forget the past and shut off pain, it lets us function, but it deadens us. We just watch our own life pass by? Who wants to function? To feel no empathy? To explode or get depressed and have no idea why? To shut down emotionally is to wither away. It's a tiny personal death. It's better to feel the range of emotions as Jesus did.

## 2. Jesus displayed the range of healthy emotions

In the gospels Jesus shows the array of emotions. As a man, he tasted all sinless human emotions" – anger, sorrow, disappointment. We may experience these as passions that lead us astray. But Jesus felt righteous anger, free from rage or excess, toward the money changers who spoiled the temple. He channeled his anger and acted. His emotions motivated him so he made the temple a better place.

Jesus felt exasperation, which is typically sinful in us. Once, when the disciples failed him, he asked, "How long do I have to put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). The words sting, but it's justified because the disciples were so disappointing. They needed to hear it.

Jesus felt sorrow. He grieved when he came upon a mother mourning the death of her only son – and he raised the child. As he healed people, he sighed or groaned, as he felt their grief (Mark 7:34, 8:12). In fact, the most common reason stated for Jesus performing a miracle is pity or compassion.

John says Jesus wept silently at the death of his friend, Lazarus (John 11:35 *dakruo* silent tears). But when Jesus foresaw that Roman soldiers would attack Jerusalem and slay its women and children he wailed (*klaio*) for the suffering he felt in advance. When he met hard-hearted sin and hypocrisy, he grieved (Mark 3:1-6). He lamented "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt 23:37).

**Jesus also felt gentle emotions.** Jesus loves and because he loves us, he laid down his life for us (John 10, 15). He felt a special fondness for the apostle (John 13:23, 20:2) and for his dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10, John 11). He felt compassion and pity when he saw the blind, lepers, the hungry and it moved him to help them.

Our anger is usually sinful. It's bad to rage over trivial things, mere irritant. Anger destroys relationships. Hate makes us ascribe dark motives to ordinary weakness: "You did it on purpose." No, it's a simple mistake, a weakness.

But Jesus did get angry, so we know anger can be the right response to abuse and exploitation. Evil ought to trouble us. Indeed if we see or suffer evil and feel nothing, it may show a hard heart. When sins cause sorrow, even agony, anger may be the best response, especially if our anger stirs the whole person to end the evil. If emotion makes us think "What can I do?" then create a plan and act on it, when emotion brings motion, we live as healthy and whole people. That is how Jesus lived – mind, emotions and will in perfect harmony for good. And that is how we live if we follow him, if his Spirit is at work in us.

## 3. Healthy emotions flow from a healthy, renewed heart.

Galatians 5 contrasts "the deeds of the flesh" or sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit - the disciple who is renewed by God's Spirit. The deeds of the flesh include an array of destructive emotions: "Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy" (5:20-21).

The Bible often shows how dark emotions flow from an evil heart. In Genesis, jealousy and shame led Cain to kill his brother Abel. In more detail, while David hid from Saul, he offered his services to a rich herdsman named Nabal. On the day for a local feast, David expected an invitation from Nabal. When it didn't come, David inquired politely. Nabal insulted him and railed at him. David became angry, too angry, but everyone knew Nabal's ways. His servant said, "He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him." His wife said he's a fool and "folly goes with him" (1 Samuel 25:17, 25). Nabal shows how the flesh leads to hate, rage and envy.

On the other hand, "the fruit of the Spirit" brings positive emotions and actions. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). If love, joy, kindness and gentleness are fruit of the Spirit, it means they emerge from us, according to the life we have by faith in God and his Spirit renews us. An apple tree naturally bears apples and a bean plant naturally bears beans. So with the Spirit and our emotions.

That means we can evaluate and control our emotions. Solomon says there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance... a time to love and a time to hate" (Eccles 3). Each is good in its time – even negative emotions.

It's tempting to think, "We should be less emotional, we should never be angry. We should shut down negative feelings." But it's better to aim for healthy emotions. And there is "a time to love and a time to hate." A time to hate! Can hate be healthy? Yes. We should hate the acts of monsters like the warlord Kony and that hatred should move people to resist him.

Again, emotions are a God-given faculty, just like mind, will, conscience, physical strength. Although our emotions can surprise and trouble us, our thoughts can too. Our emotions fail us, but so does our will and body. Emotions are no more and no less fallen than any other aspect of our person. Emotions aren't irrational or groundless, they spring from our heart, our core, our deepest hopes and aspirations. That is why the Bible commands our emotions. And we can heed them.

We have to train, strengthen, disciple our emotions just like our other faculties. If you want to run a 10k race, you start with a mile and build. If you want to develop your will to work, you must practice your focus and learn to block distractions. Mentally, we grow by solving tougher problems, reading more dense literature.

It may seem impossible to control our emotions because they can sweep over us. But God **commends** and commands many emotions: compassion, peace, joy, gratitude, love. He says, "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous" (Psa 32.11).

### **Faithful emotions**

God expects us know our emotions – joy or sadness, trust or disgust, anger or contentment, euphoria or anxiety. He also expects us to control them because they don't *simply* wash over us. Just as God gave us

a conscience as a moral compass, so he gave us an emotional compass or sense. When we overreact, we usually know to apologize. We may say, "I don't know what came over me."

It's tragic when people are emotionally blind. Romans 1 says some give themselves over to sin, including sinful emotions. They are unashamed of their wrath, envy and hatred.

But the Lord's compassion, love and pity – his good emotions – moved him to redeem us from all sin and brokenness, including emotional brokenness. That's why the Lord addresses our emotional life. He forbids some emotions: "Don't hate your neighbor" (Lev 19:17) and "Do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

He commands others emotions "Be tender-hearted" (Eph 4:32). "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous" (Psa 32:11). We should "go in peace" (Luke 7:50). Why? "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom 5:1).

The Lord steers our emotions. Anger is often misguided or excessive, but not always. Paul says, "Be angry but do not sin" (Eph 4:29). So there is a good and timely anger. It's wrong to be calm or indifferent in the face of great evil. Godly anger can stir action. In Psalm 139:23, David dares say of wicked men, "I hate them with a perfect hatred."

Anger, envy, indignation, or grief can surprise us. Or we feel anxiety and think, "Jesus gave me his peace; I wish I lived like it." Or we may read Hebrews 12:1, which says "Let us be grateful" and think, "I should be more grateful." It takes time – like training – to run 10k. But Scripture stimulates the desire.

This was a very difficult sermon for me. There are so many sources, so much biblical data. I had a hard time organizing it and I felt myself getting frustrated, even as I wrote about peace and gratitude! Then I re-read something by William Alston a Christian philosopher. He said we should distinguish emotions and emotional dispositions or tendencies.<sup>6</sup>

Distinguish a fear and a disposition to fear. We have a disposition when we are ready to feel afraid of something snakes - again and again. Remember Nabal: he was ready to explode. No one could talk to him. He was disposed to anger. Some people are ready to fly off the handle.

But here is good news. Even if you're disposed to bad emotion, it's forgivable, curable. If you are rebelling against God, you may be an angry person. If you live for yourself, things that thwart your plans may make you angry. You need to repent. Stop being so selfish. Ask God to forgive you. He will and he will also give you a new heart, like his. You may yearn to be loving, kind, compassionate.

If you are a believer, and you're ready to rage, ask yourself how you lost your heritage of peace, love, gratitude, and joy. It's yours, but you probably forfeited it to some idol. What? Respect, control, wealth, ease, or some personal goal. Name it, dethrone it, and some control should return over time.

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<sup>6</sup> Alston, Emotion, Enc Phil 479-86

It's a great thing that God commands the emotions of his people. He says "be grateful" because we can be grateful. We can be disposed to gratitude. We have so many reasons to thank God - for himself, his provision, his gifts – our food and friends, his graces and guidance. May we grow in godly dispositions of joy and peace and love.

Paul says, "Love with another with brotherly affection" - with feeling. Peter says something marvelous: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). Listen: Peter says *you have obeyed the truth*. To obey the truth is to believe the gospel. As a result, you are pure. You *have* love for each other. God poured his love into our hearts. Therefore "love one another deeply from the heart."

Because God has loved us, because God's Spirit enables, we can disciple our emotions. We can have a disposition to peace, joy and love. We gather on Sundays, as a worshipping community, to meet with the God of perfect emotions. He expressed his emotions in action, in covenant faithfulness, so we can live faithfully between Sundays. We can disciple our emotions and taste the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace. They express themselves in patience, kindness goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.