

Emotionally Healthy Christianity

Revelation 2:1-5

(Discussion guide on last page)

Regarding emotions, have you ever heard someone say that love is more than a feeling, it's an action? Or that Spirit-filled Christians are not led by their emotions, but by faith? If you've been around the church for some time, you've likely heard these sayings or something similar.

Although there is truth in both those statements, if we don't interpret them properly, we can devalue the vital need for healthy emotions in the Christian life. The bible has much to say about healthy and unhealthy emotions. The scriptures are clear, to be spiritually healthy Christians, we must have healthy emotions.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus had many deep emotional experiences. He experienced sympathy, joy, anger, sorrow, anguish and compassion. And at the center of His intense emotions, was love. Because of His love, Jesus was moved with compassion over the needs, hurts and pain of others. Jesus felt and expressed intense emotions, which were not a sign of weakness, but of His great love. Luke 10:21; John 2:14-16; 11:33-35; 15:11

The scriptures do imply that despite our feelings we ought to do acts of love (Luke 6:27). "The absence of 'emotional intensity' does not excuse us from obedience" (Alister Begg). But although we ought to do acts of love, whether we feel it or not, "this doesn't mean that the right response is to be content with a cold heart as long as we are gritting our teeth and doing the right things" (Alister Begg).

"Far from being the caboose, feelings and emotions are a vital part of our humanity which needs to be cultivated through God's Word" (Daniel Henderson). This cultivation is vital, because our deepest affections will shape and guide our actions.

In His letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul wrote: "*So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not*

only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” 1 Thessalonians 2:78

When we know the love of God, we will have deep affections for God and genuine affection for His people. We will be moved with compassion over the hurts and pains of others and our compassion will compel us to take action.

The word of God not our emotions should be our ultimate guide in life. But though our emotions are not always a reliable guide, they serve as a vital gauge to our spiritual health.

Main idea: Spiritually healthy Christians have healthy emotions rooted in the love of Christ.

This morning we are going to see that although the church of Ephesus was doing some good things, they were doing them out of duty not out of love. And due to the absence of love, Christ’s overall assessment of the church was that it was in grave danger. Because the church was not emotionally healthy, they were spiritually dying. The lights were about to be cut off.

But in addition to His evaluation of the church's poor emotional health, Jesus also gave them a prescription for returning to an emotionally healthy condition, which would enable them to continue to shine for Christ in a dark place.

1. Jesus’ praises for the church

Now, as Jesus gave His assessment of the church of Ephesus, He begins by expressing His praises for the church. It’s important to note that the church of Ephesus was located in a bustling city filled with people from many different regions. And because of its famous pagan temples, Ephesus was also the center of pagan worship and idolatry.

One of the most famous temples in Ephesus was the temple of Artemis. It was a morally corrupt place. The idol for Artemis was a vile multi-breasted image that was said to have fallen from heaven (Acts

19:35). Among other gross forms of sexual immorality, thousands of priestesses, who were little more than ritual prostitutes, played a major role in the worship of Artemis.

More significantly, the church of Ephesus was also one of the seven first century churches that Jesus evaluated in the first 3 chapters of the book of Revelation. The conditions of these churches are a prophetic picture of the kinds of churches that have existed throughout the church age.

Regarding His prophetic assessments, the church of Ephesus was the first church that Jesus addressed. And as He gives His findings, He doesn't begin by pointing out the problem that He saw, but rather with praises for the church:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.”
Revelation 2:1-3

We see here that in view of all the paganism around them, Jesus commends the church of Ephesus for their *patient endurance*. In other words, this was a church that despite the intense pressures of a corrupt society, was faithfully laboring to serve the cause of Christ. What's more, Jesus commended the church for the spiritual discernment they had to test and identify the false teachers of their day.

Now in His evaluation of the church, Jesus also saw a major problem that threatened to sink the ship. Although the church of Ephesus was commendably bearing up under the pressures of a corrupt society, there was a breach in the underbelly of the church that in time could cause it to go under.

As Jesus walked among the golden lamp-stands, which is a metaphor for how He was carefully watching over the local churches, Jesus said: *“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”* (Revelation 2:4)

2. Jesus’ problem with the church

With this, we come to our second point: Jesus’ problem with the church. Let me ask you, if a husband told his wife, “I’m going to stay married to you. I’m going to live in the same house with you. I’m going to continue working and doing my best to provide for this home. However, I don’t love you anymore. I don’t have any affections for you or desire to be with you,” would that be alright with his wife? And what if a wife said similar things to her husband? “I’m going to perform the duties of a wife, but I don’t love you anymore.” Would that be alright with her husband? This would not be an emotionally healthy marriage.

Let me be clear, I’m not implying that when feelings fluctuate in a marriage that this is grounds for divorce. But what I am saying is that oneness in marriage, rooted in genuine love and affection, is a vital part of a healthy marriage. If we are making the proper investments in our marriage, our love will grow deeper and stronger.

There is a unique thrill and excitement that a couple has when they first meet and start dating. But although there is that unique exhilaration in the beginning, there is a deeper love and affection that can be developed over time. This deeper love that must be intentionally cultivated, is even stronger than the initial feelings of love in the beginning of the relationship.

Similarly, our love relationship with Christ, which a marriage is to reflect, must also be cultivated through making intentional investments. And as we make them, the Spirit of God takes us deeper into the love of God so that everything we do for God is motivated by love for God and love for people.

As we learned last week, all the Christ-like qualities contained in the fruit of the Spirit, which include healthy emotions, flow from love. The

more rooted we are in God's love through the inner work of the Spirit, the more love, joy and peace will spring from our hearts.

Moreover, the more rooted we are in God's love, the more we will exhibit the other qualities of the fruit of the Spirit, like patience and kindness. Love, the bible says, is patient and kind. And it's these qualities of the fruit of the Spirit, more so than how much bible we know, that makes us compelling witnesses for Christ in the world.

Remember, although the church of Ephesus had correct doctrine, and were not living like the pagans around them, Jesus pointed out that they had a major problem. What was that problem? The love they had at first for God, and no doubt for one another, was waning. They were doing good and commendable things that every church should be doing. However, their relationship with God wasn't what it once was. The love and passion they had for God had weakened and was growing cold.

Consequently, they were in danger of becoming a legalistic church filled with self-righteous people who think that they can earn God's love and acceptance. As one bible teacher put it, "Obedience out of duty had replaced obedience out of love for Christ." Danny Akin

Again, the church of Ephesus had correct doctrine and were able and willing to call out false teachers. Nevertheless, it was a sinking ship. This was the case because apart from love, a focus on *doctrinal purity* will make a church cold, prideful, and divisive.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way: "When love dies orthodox doctrine becomes a corpse, a powerless formalism. Adhesion to the truth sours into bigotry when the sweetness and light of love to Jesus depart."

In light of this, it seems that in many churches today there are two extremes, formalism or emotionalism. On the one hand, you have churches that are focused on teaching correct doctrine and formalism, but are very reserved when it comes to showing emotion, almost stoic like. But on the flip side, there are churches that place high spiritual value on being totally free about expressing one's emotions.

A Spirit-filled Christian will experience healthy emotions like joy, and will, for example, express that joy in various ways, like through exuberant singing unto the Lord (Ephesians 5:18-19). But a Spirit-filled Christian also has self-control which will keep them from expressing emotions in a way that draws attention to themselves or distracts other's attention away from Christ. 1 Corinthians 14:40

Like the church of Ephesus, mere formalism and orthodoxy will kill a church today. But mere emotionalism, which is emotion devoid of *Spirit illuminated truth*, will also render a church powerless to effect real change for Christ.

Concerning the development and expression of healthy emotions in worship, Daniel Henderson writes: "We must cultivate a Christlike, Spirit-prompted freedom to feel. Yet we must guard our hearts from simply being excited about excitement, emotional about emotions, or worshiping the feelings of worship. Vaught Roberts strikes this balance, 'We should not assume that we have encountered God just because we get emotional. It might simply have been the skill of the musicians or the beauty of the songs that moved us. But please do not conclude from this that we should be wary of all emotion.' Ed Steele confirms, 'The key is to keep our focus on God as the center of our worship and not the emotions that the music may evoke, lest we find ourselves worshiping the feelings generated by the music more than God. We have freedom of emotional expression but focused on the root source, not the result.' Again, the root source is Christ and His glorious gospel.

Spirit-filled churches, then, make much of Jesus and the primacy of the new covenant. This affects our thoughts with inspired truth, which fuels our trust and moves our emotions in attributing all-out worth to Jesus. This is not done in some manipulative cheerleader mode but through a Christ-focused environment where leaders and participants alike pursue the glory of the Son of God, in step with the purpose of the work of the Spirit."

Now it's important to note here that Jesus didn't say to the church of Ephesus that they lost the love they had at first, but that they abandoned the love they had at first. It's not something that just inevitably happened.

You know, this is also true in marriage. Research shows that one of the top reasons that many formerly married couples give for why they got divorced is loss of intimacy and passion in their marriage. They say that they fell out of love.

Many other couples, although they've chosen to remain married, confess that they no longer feel a deep connection with their spouse. And in some cases, many couples that have experienced a loss of intimacy have no hope that it could be regained. They've accepted it as the status quo and learned to co-exist without it.

But is this God's will and God's design for marriage? Is the loss of intimacy and passion in marriage inevitable? We learned from our text that it's possible for a believer's love relationship with God to grow cold. But it happens because we abandon the love we had at first. That is, it happens because we neglect the investments we must make in cultivating our relationship with God. And the same is true in marriage.

Beloved, we were made to receive and to give love. And the highest form of love is God. To love to your fullest capacity, you must find your ultimate satisfaction in God's love for you. To have the highest emotionally healthy relationships with others, we must come into an emotionally satisfying relationship with God.

This vertical relationship begins when we come to saving faith in Christ. And in order to grow in our love relationship with God, we must invest time, physical effort and emotional energy into our relationship with God. And again, the same is true of horizontal relationships, especially marriage.

3. Jesus' prescription to the church

That said, we come to our final point: Jesus prescription to the church. After pointing out the problem in the church of Ephesus, namely that they had abandoned the love they had at first, Jesus gives a threefold remedy for the problem. The first thing He instructs the church to do is to **remember**:

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first...” Revelation 2:5a

If you’ve come into a saving relationship with God through faith in the finish work of Christ, let me ask you, how would you describe the condition of your relationship with God? Are you growing in your love relationship with God or have you lapsed into just going through the motions of religion? Do you have a passion for God or have you’ve become passive or even apathetic?

If you know that you are not where you once were in your relationship with God, then you need to **remember** from where you have fallen. That’s the first step that Jesus tells the church of Ephesus to take—a church that allowed their love for God to grow cold.

Remember what it was like when your heart was on fire for God and the things of God. Remember how grateful you were for what Jesus had done for you. Remember the intentional investment you were making in your relationship with God that perhaps you’re neglecting now.

Do you pray like you did when your heart was on fire for God? Are you in God’s word regularly? Are you just reading the word to check a box, or do you take time to mediate on the word, pray the word, and journal about what God is saying to your heart? We need to do more than just search the scriptures, we need to allow the scriptures to search us.

Are you investing in others to help them grow in the Lord and allowing others to invest in you? We fan the flame of love and joy in our hearts by reminding each other of who God is and what He’s done in our lives.

Secondly, Jesus tells the church of Ephesus to **repent**. Repentance means a *change of mind that leads to a change of actions*. Nothing is going to change in our relationship with God or others until we change. Stop thinking that everybody else needs to change, including your spouse, and start seeking God to change you from the inside out.

And that inside-out change starts with a change of mind. Allow God through His Word to daily correct your faulty thinking, and pray for God to align your heart with His.

Lastly, Jesus tells the church of Ephesus—a church that has grown cold in their love, to *do the works you did at first*. In other words, He instructed the church to **return** to the acts of love that they did when their hearts were on fire for God.

God created us to experience emotions and feelings. Emotions and feelings can be wonderful. But the problem is that our feelings and emotions fluctuate. Although they can be a great **gauge** to our spiritual health, they are not always the best **guide**. So, we should not wait until we feel like praying or reading our bibles before we start doing so.

When I had cancer and was receiving chemo therapy, there were times that I didn't have much of an appetite. But even though I didn't have an appetite, felt nauseous, and my taste buds were shot, the doctor said I needed to eat. My body needed physical nourishment, especially because of the toxic chemo in my body.

Similarly, if you don't have a deeply emotional longing and desire to spend time with God in His word, it could be that there are some spiritually toxic things going on in your heart that's killing your spiritual appetite. But the fact that you don't feel like getting into the word, which is an indication that you're not spiritual healthy, is all the more reason why you need to get into God's word. We must feast on the word to live. And when we do, we will come to a place where we will live to feast.

Again, to renew our love for God, or to keep our love from waning, we must remember. To remember we must be reminded. We must not only recall to mind what the Lord has done for us, we must daily renew our minds in the truth of who Jesus is.

Notice that after giving the Ephesian church the prescription to renewing their first love, Jesus said, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (Revelations 2:7a).

Beloved, the indwelling Holy Spirit produces in us healthy emotions when our thoughts are shaped by the truth of His word. What’s more, Holy Spirit generated healthy emotions will impact our outward behavior. “Emotional reactions are essentially outward expressions of what is going on inwardly.” Daniel Henderson

What you set your mind on the most, is what you love the most. And what you love most will control your actions. Whatever captures your mind, will capture your affections and your affections will determine your actions.

What do you set your mind on the most? If our love for God is diminishing, we must return to the first works, especially communion with God, whether we feel like it or not. We must get alone with God in stillness and silence. We must give Him our undivided attention. We must make time for the Spirit to speak to our hearts through the word and heal our damaged emotions. When we do, in time, our love for God will be reignited.

And the same is true in marriage. I appreciate what Tim Keller wrote about this: “In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love dry up. And when that happens you must remember that the essence of marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love. So, what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions, you must BE tender, understanding, forgiving and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant

in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love.”
(Timothy J. Keller, The Meaning of Marriage)

To cultivate healthy emotions rooted in love we must do the works we did at first. We must make intentional investments in our horizontal relationships in our homes, friendships, churches and especially our marriages.

We must put first things first. We must express our love and feelings. We must be present. We must make time for heart to heart communication. We need to do acts of service. We need to give appropriate physical affection. We must be tender, thoughtful and considerate of one another. We must pray for one another and with one another.

If the fire in your marriage has gone out, don't wait for a feeling to act. Decide to love. Make the investments and in time the feelings will catch up. While you make those investments in your horizontal relationships, remember that you'll never know how to fully love until you find that God's love is enough.

Conclusion

What is the emotional condition of your relationship with God? Do you have a deeply affectionate and joy filled relationship with Jesus or are you just going through the motions of religion?

A relationship with God begins by receiving Christ as Savior and Lord who died in our place so that we can be forgiven of our sin and be reconciled to God. If you have a relationship with God, have you been growing in your love for God or is your love waning? If your love is diminishing, **remember** where you once were, **repent** and **return** to the acts of love you did at first.

Don't let your light go out. Look to the Spirit to help you intentionally keep the emotional fire in the lamp of your heart burning for Jesus so that you can continue to shine for Him in a cold and dark world.

Discussion Questions

Are emotions a reliable guide in the Christian life? Why or why not?
How can emotions serve as a gauge for one's spiritual health? (1
Thessalonians 2:7-8)

Jesus commended the church before he pointed out a major problem in the church. This was true with most of the other churches Jesus evaluated, pointed out the good first, then the bad. Is there any significance in that order?

What did Jesus have against the church of Ephesus and how did the problem come to be? (Rev. 2:4)

Why weren't the good things the church was doing good enough?

What was the prescription that Jesus gave to the church that abandoned the love they had at first? How can a marriage / or horizontal relationships benefit from this prescription?

How would you gauge your emotional health? What negative / unhealthy emotion do you struggle with the most? How can God's love be the cure?