

State of Mind
Detox
February 24, 2019

**Congregational Songs: Whom Shall I Fear /
Because He Lives**

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature – Keep Your Head Up / Offering

Good morning everyone. Glad you made it today.

As Shannon said, we're in a series called *State of Mind* and if you missed either of the first two messages, you can go back and watch, listen to, or read the message on our website, app and podcast.

The purpose of this series is to learn ...

- How to take control of our mental and emotional health
- How to be *proactive* instead of *reactive* when it comes to what's going on inside of us.
- How to, as the biblical proverb puts it, “guard your heart for everything you do flows from it.”ⁱ

Because whatever you allow to become established in the deeper levels of your subconscious – at the very core of your being (which is what biblical writers meant by the word *heart*) – will eventually come out in your life.

So you better be on guard. You better be in control.

So, in the first week of this series, we talked about *thinking about our thinking*:

- Giving thought to what seems to just run through our minds automatically.
- And then thinking about the assumptions and core beliefs that drive those thoughts.
- And then taking what God says about those core beliefs and replacing them or adjusting them if it's necessary.

Then last week, we went a little further with that idea and talked about a specific recurring challenge to our

mental and emotional health which is *how we perceive and react to problems when they occur.*

- We looked at four negative mindsets that typically guide what many of us think and feel and say and do when unpleasant and undesirable events occur.
- Then we talked about four *alternative* mindsets based on what God says.
- And how renewing your mind - aligning your thinking with those thoughts - is a proactive move towards mental and emotional health.
- And then I gave a couple of

assignments to put these ideas into practice ...

One of which was “don’t complain or curse” when something goes wrong because that automatic reaction continues the negative pattern.

I’m curious – did anyone have any success with that this past week?

I actually did. Several times I was able to stand back from a situation and put on the “acceptance mindset” that we talked about. I was able to say to myself, “Well, Rick, this is just another example of life in an imperfect fallen world. And I can deal with this.”

It was actually very nice.

When Life Hurts

Of course, it was also pretty easy because dealing with “problems” is one thing. Dealing with things that go beyond the level of a “problem” is another.

Sometimes – and we looked at this last summer in our *At the Movies* series ... sometimes the things we experience in life are *evil*. Sometimes they’re even *tragic*.

And when those things happen, they cause us real pain which is why ...

One of the greatest challenges to our mental health is how we handle our emotions when life hurts.

And that’s not just my opinion. Dr.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel, who is both a biochemist and a certified psychoanalyst who has studied this issue, writes that ...

“What we learn in our society is *not* how to work with our emotions, but how to *block* and *avoid* them. We do it quite well: Between alcohol use, prescription drug use and screen time, there are a multitude of ways to avoid our feelings.

However, she continues ...

“Thwarting emotions is not good for mental or physical health. It’s like pressing on the gas and brakes of your car at the same time, creating an internal pressure cooker.

... It puts stress on the mind and the body, creating psychological distress and symptoms ... [and] ... physical problems like heart disease, intestinal problems, headaches, insomnia and autoimmune disorders.”

Which is why, again, one of the greatest challenges to our mental health is how we handle our emotions when life hurts.

“When we *do* acknowledge [our emotions],” Hendel continues, “we swat them away with mantras learned since childhood [such as] ...

- “Mind over matter”
- “Get a grip”
- “Suck it up”

- [and as we heard in the song a few minutes ago “gotta keep your head up.”]

But that doesn't actually work, which is why, she concludes ...

“Most people are ruled by their emotions without any awareness that this is happening.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, even though we try to ignore or stuff the emotions that naturally result from the pain of life, something is still percolating beneath the surface.

And if we don't address that constructively, a toxic internal sludge develops that eventually darkens our state of mind and leads us down the path to anxiety, depression and

sometimes worse.

And some of us here today or watching online are in those places right now because of how we've handled or mishandled the painful experiences of our lives.

And I don't say that to be critical or condemning of anyone else because *I've been there, too.*

For a long time, I ignored and mishandled the pain in my life until I discovered that toxic emotional and spiritual sludge was totally clouding my thinking and my perceptions. It was feeding into the kinds of negative mindsets we talked about last week.

And then, about eight years ago, I had an

unexpected personal awakening in this area.

Some of the folks here at NHCC who knew some of the trials and tribulations we'd gone through as a church since our beginning in 1994 ... as well as some of my personal history ... graciously and generously decided to pay for me and my wife, Jetta, to go to a one-week retreat for ministry leaders and their spouses.

Honestly, I didn't really want to go because ... "I'm fine. It's OK."

- "It's OK" I would tell myself, "that sometimes people I care about die or move away or get mad at me and leave. That's just part of being a pastor."

- “It’s OK,” I would say to myself, “that people you love and pour your life into turn away from God. That’s just how it is in the ministry. Jesus said it would be that way.”
- “It’s OK that people think you’re heartless or a dictator when you let staff members go – and you’re not able to say why. That’s just part of being a boss.”
- “It’s OK that your livelihood (and that of the people you employ) is dependent on offerings but when you ask people to give, a lot of them think ‘all he cares about is my money.’ Jesus said it would be that way, too.”

“I’m fine. It’s OK. I don’t really need this retreat.”

Of course, I didn’t actually *say that* since it had already been paid for and everyone who had contributed was so excited about it ... even though I wasn’t.

So, off we went.

I’ll spare you the details but in that week it became very clear to me *what a mess I was* because all of my life I had been doing with emotional pain pretty much what everyone does.

Which is to ...

- Ignore it
- Minimize it

- Spiritualize it
- *And*, in my case, *feed it* ... literal toxic sludge ...

Otherwise known as *Little Debbie* cakes, cookies and snack bars.

And it was at that retreat that I began to understand that, if I was going to improve my emotional, mental and spiritual health, I needed to “detox” – to clean out the soul-sludge of pain that builds up in me – on a regular basis.

And when I say “regular basis,” I don’t mean daily or weekly because, at this point, I’ve developed a sensitivity to when sludge is beginning to accumulate. But when I was starting out, I was much

more disciplined about a schedule because this was a new way of thinking about my thinking and processing my emotions.

Radical Techniques

Now, what I want to share with you in the time that remains are *three radical techniques* prescribed by Jesus and the ancient prophets that have been most helpful to me in this area.

And since the kinds of things that cause me pain are pretty common to everyone else, I have a hunch they will be helpful to you, too ... even if you're not a Christian.

Even if you're not a Christian, you can do these things and you will improve

your mental and emotional health although, as we'll see, Christians do have a distinct advantage with two of them.

So, what are these radical techniques?

And let me just say when you hear what they are you're probably going to think "Seriously? Those aren't radical" because, in all honesty, they're fairly simple concepts.

The reason I call them "radical" isn't because they're complex or even strange. It's because most people *don't* or *won't* do them. Either we're afraid to do them, or we won't make time to do them or we just don't believe they'll make a difference. But they will.

So, enough with the tease! 😊

Here are the three radical techniques – three practices taught and modeled by Jesus and the ancient prophets of Israel that serve to clean out the toxins that poison the heart, the mind and the soul.

Ready?

- Confront
- Forgive
- Lament

Would you say those three words with me? Confront, forgive, lament.

Let me add a bit of focus to those words and then we're going to go into detail on each of them.

The three techniques are to ...

- Confront difficult people and situations.
- Forgive those who have wronged you.
- Lament your losses.

And, again, we're going to break these down into further detail and explain how to do them but the point is ... *when you employ these three techniques, you will improve your mental and emotional health.*

And again, that's not just my opinion.

For instance, when it comes to confronting difficult people and situations, one counselor writes ...

Trying to dodge challenging

situations often allows you immediate gratification and relief by avoiding your worst fears. However, in actuality, repeated patterns of avoidance typically reinforce anxiety and a sense of learned helplessness. As you start to avoid more and more situations you begin to decrease your tolerance for risk, adversity and new situations.

From that point on, you're likely to anticipate and interpret situations as fear-inducing, even when they were once tolerable in the past. The more you avoid these situations, the more likely you are to avoid them in the future.

And so the vicious cycle continues –

ad infinitum.ⁱⁱⁱ

The best way to deal with conflict is to face it and face the problem. Then we are not storing up fearful emotions and trauma for the future.^{iv}

When it comes to forgiveness, you're probably familiar with the mental health implications but I'll go ahead and share some of this anyway. Dr. Karen Swartz, director of the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation Clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, writes that ...

“People who hang on to grudges are more likely to experience severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as other health conditions.

“Chronic anger puts you into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions.”^v

On the other hand, in a study commissioned by the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, researchers interviewed 1,500 older adults who identified themselves as Christians. Those who tended to practice forgiveness reported greater personal well-being, including lower levels of depression and physical health complaints as well as higher levels of life satisfaction.^{vi}

Again, you already know that, right?

Finally, when it comes to lamenting your losses, psychiatrist and author Dr. Robert Berezin, writes that ...

“Mourning (or lamenting) allows us to recover from deaths and losses; It is what allows us to recover from trauma. It is the central biological process of the limbic-cortical brain for change, growth, recovery, and healing.

He continues:

“I’ve heard people say, ‘What’s the point of grieving, you can’t bring a loved one back from the dead.’

That of course, is true, but it is what allows *us*, the survivors, to return back to the land of the living and resume our lives. By grieving our loss, we can allow it to live on and be enshrined as a loving memory where it belongs.^{vii}

On the other hand, those who do not lament and grieve properly sometimes enter into what psychologists call “complicated grief” – a chronic, debilitating mental health condition that worsens over time, rather than gets better.^{viii}

And, again, the point of all that ...

- If you want to detox your soul from the accumulated emotional sludge

that comes from the pain of living
in a sin-cursed world ...

- If you want to take control of your
mental and emotional health

... the practices of confronting,
forgiving and lamenting are critical.

So, let's get into the details of each one.

Confronting

Let's talk about confronting difficult
people and situations, which again, is
the opposite of what most of us want to
do because it's not easy.

**But this is the practice that Jesus laid out
for his followers.**

“If your brother or sister

sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.”

Matthew 18:15 (NIV)

And doesn't that sound like fun?

Nope, which is why what we do instead is to pretend that everything is OK when it really isn't.

- And the toxic sludge starts to accumulate.
- And we begin to think the worst about that person or situation instead of the best.
- And that negative mindset begins to darken our mood and all of our

interactions.

So, even though it's hard to confront and have the hard conversation, in the end it's better for everyone.

Now, one of the things that always comes up whenever we talk about this is “well, Rick, if you take this concept to the extreme, you'll just be a whiner and a pest because you'll be confronting everyone about every little offense. And no one will want to be around you.”

And that's true. So you need to have some wisdom and discretion concerning when it's time to do this.

How do you know? I think there are two indicators.

When you're having angry conversations with the person in your head (bitterness), it's time to confront.

When you're having multiple conversations with others about the person (gossip), it's time to confront.

Now, as to how to actually do it ... just remember “right time, right place, right attitude.”

1. Don't just blab it out without asking permission “hey, can we talk for a minute?”
2. Don't do it when other people are around or the person is in the middle of something else.
3. Use non-judgmental language.

For instance “I need to tell you some things that are going to be hard for me to say and maybe hard for you to hear. But I’m starting to feel bitterness towards you and I don’t like it. It’s becoming a part of every interaction I have with you. I’m constantly avoiding it – and you – because I want you to think that everything is just peachy between us when it isn’t.

“So, can you help me understand <fill-in-the-blank> ...”

Jesus says that sometimes they will hear you and agree with you ... though maybe not at first – there might be some disagreement and some harsh words and stress.

But if they *do* listen, Jesus goes on to say “you have won them over,” which means you’ve restored the relationship with them. You’re on the same page again.

And if they don’t, you’ve still done them and you a big favor. You’ve come out of the shadows and you’re no longer pretending. You’re now telling the truth which is always better for your mental and emotional health.

Forgiving

Now, let’s talk about forgiving those who have wronged us.

And there are so many things that could and need to be said about this issue. I can’t count the number of messages I’ve

given on it over the years. But since we only have a few minutes so I'm going to try and boil it down to the essence.

Right after Jesus talks about confronting, Matthew tells us that ...

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:21-22

(NIV)

This principle became so established among Christ followers that 30 years later ...

The Apostle Paul would write to one of the churches ...

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

*Ephesians 4:31-32
(ESV)*

In other words, when you have the right because you have been wronged by someone's sin to be bitter and angry and slanderous and malicious, *don't*.

Instead, be kind, compassionate and forgiving just like Jesus – who was also wronged by you and your sin and had the right to be bitter and angry, etc, etc towards you, yet wasn't.

The idea here is that, as a Christian, out of the experience of grace and forgiveness in your own life, you now have the ability to forgive others (which is why I said earlier that a Christian has a bit of an advantage in this – and which various research studies have shown to be true).

That said, that doesn't mean this is an easy thing to do partly because we're a little bit confused on what forgiveness actually is. And that confusion typically comes down to two questions.

First question I think a lot of us have, and that I had is ... *what about forgiving someone who hasn't confessed to you that they did wrong; or someone who hasn't come to you and asked to be*

forgiven? Is forgiveness conditional?

It can be. But it doesn't have to be.

In fact, researchers into this issue discovered that unconditional forgiveness was associated with higher levels of well-being, but forgiveness that required the wrongdoer's contrition was actually associated with lower levels of well-being.

And that makes sense: By requiring the offender's contrition, we're letting a person who harmed us decide if or when we can benefit from forgiveness. That's giving the wrongdoer a lot of control over our lives.^{ix}

Point being, you can forgive regardless of whether or not they ever confess;

regardless of whether or not they come to you and say, “Please forgive me” because ...

Forgiveness is simply releasing an offender from the debt they owe you.

Forgiveness is something that happens inside of you, not them.

Now, it *can* change the world of the person who is being forgiven (especially if they realize they’ve hurt you and offended you and they’ve come to you and said “I’m so sorry. Would you please forgive me?”) It *can* change their world, but that’s just a byproduct.

The change that is ALWAYS brought about by forgiveness is what happens inside of you, inside of me. *We are set free from the bitterness that’s holding on*

to us which is why forgiving has such a positive effect on our mental and emotional health.

The second question is ... *does forgiveness require reconciliation?*

In other words, do I have to have the same relationship with this person that I did before? Because, this was a really hard thing and I'm not sure I want to jump back into this because maybe they're not really altogether yet and I could get wounded again.

So, does forgiveness mean reconciliation? The answer is, no, not necessarily.

To forgive someone does not mean you have to be their best friend. In fact, it

doesn't mean you have to have any kind of a relationship with that person, going forward, at all. Reconciliation and restoration to what was before is dependent on how much trust can be re-established in the relationship ... which is a completely different issue.

Forgiveness simply means you drop the demand that justice be done in their life with respect to yours.

One more thing that may help in understanding and practicing forgiveness.

Forgiving is *not* forgetting. Forgiving is *choosing* not to remember.

I mean, there is no way you are ever going to forget something like being betrayed. You will never forget if you

were beaten or if you were abused or if you were robbed or if you were raped. You can't forget those things. Those memories will always be with you.

But you *can choose* not to remember.

When something happens that tweaks your memories about that particular person and situation, you can choose to say, "No, I have forgiven. I have chosen to release that person from their debt. I will not allow my mind to replay the offense that was committed against me."

You can do that. I can do that.

And, amazingly, that's exactly what God does for those of us who have turned to Christ and received his forgiveness.

Listen to what God says in Hebrews 8:12, He says:

[For people who come to Christ] “I will forgive their sins and will no longer remember their wrongs.”

Hebrews 8:12 (TEV)

Notice that God doesn't say, “I'm going to forget their wrongs. He says, “I'm going to *choose not to remember.*”

... which makes sense because with all the damage that sin has done to His creation, it would be impossible for God to *forget* what has happened.

But, He says, “instead of choosing to remember your sin, I'm going to remember that I've chosen to bear your sin in myself.” He remembers that we

are forgiven.

And that's what we have to do if we're going to continue to live in forgiveness. And we may have to remember that 70 times a day.

Lamenting

Ok, so we've looked at confronting difficult people and situations, and forgiving those who have wronged us. Now, let's talk about lamenting our losses.

And again, I'm really going to shortchange this one so if you want to know more about it, go on to our website or app and look for a message from August 2011 called "The Lost Art of Lament."

“Lament” is not a word we hear very often these days, which is unfortunate because “lamenting” is crucial to the detox process. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is “a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.” There’s a time to laugh ... but there’s also *a time to weep*. There’s a time to dance ... but there’s also *a time to mourn*.

Unfortunately, you and I live in a culture that’s very intentional about laughing and dancing but has no clue when it comes to weeping and mourning – *lamenting* – when loss and disappointment visit our lives.

Compounding the problem for those of us who are Christians is the

misconception we're supposed to be happy-sappy about everything that happens to us. "Praise Jesus, isn't that special!"

But if you pay close attention to what the scripture actually models for us, what we see is the exact opposite.

For instance, when King David of Israel wrote Psalm 13, he was going through a very tough time.

This is what he prayed:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

Slide

How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.

Psalms 13:2-3 (NIV)

By the way, two thirds of the biblical Book of Psalms (which some have called the “prayer and worship manual” of Scripture) are just like that. They’re *laments* where David and other writers shout at God and pray wild and crazy prayers. They tell God exactly what they’re feeling and without fear of retaliation.

The Book of Job models the very same principle.

For reasons he is unaware of, Job suffers

terribly and he does what David does: he complains loud and long to God. As the story goes, his three friends who have come to console him hear his lament and they counsel him to stop. They advise him to keep his feelings to himself and avoid committing blasphemy.

And then God shows up.

But instead of squishing Job like a gnat, God speaks directly to one of Job's friends.

He says ...

*“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” Job
42:7 (NIV)*

- And the truth about God is that God doesn't ask us to pretend that bad is good.
- The truth about God is that God isn't offended when we bring our lament to Him.
- The truth about God is that God can handle it when we pour out the pain and anguish without first trying to clean it up.

That's why David encourages us to ...

*Trust in Him at all times,
you people; pour out your
hearts to him for God is our
refuge.*

Psalm 62:8 (NIV)

What a picture! Lamenting those

situations and experiences which are *not* good (pouring out our hearts to God – being honest about how we feel) while trusting that those same situations and experiences are tools that God can and will use *for* good – our good.

That's why one author writes:

Lament is a naming of the bad which has been allowed by the Good while also expressing our radical trust in God's reliability.^x

And that balance is not only what keeps the Christian faith from turning into something fake and inauthentic. It's what allows us to detox from the pain we suffer that just doesn't make sense to us.

Now, practically speaking, when you

lament ...

- You begin by naming the bad that is or has taken place in your life. You make a list.
- And then you confront God with that list. “These things do not make sense in light of who You are.”
- And then you become silent. You just wait.
- And then, when you are able ... reaffirm trust in His goodness.

Every Psalm of lament except for one follows this pattern. It moves from complaint and confrontation to worshipping God because the writers believe that God’s unfailing love

obligates Him to hear and respond.

That is the context of their lament and grief; they feel free to express their emotion because they believe God loves them and can be trusted to make good on His promises.

Response

Ok, so those are the three radical techniques that can make a difference in your mental and emotional health if you will practice them on a regular basis; if from time-to-time ...

... you'll get alone by yourself and just ask these questions:

- What situation or person am I avoiding out of fear?
- Who am I holding a grudge against?

- What losses have I suffered that cause me to cringe or wince when I think of them?

**And then, take the appropriate action:
confront, forgive and lament.**

So, your assignment for this week (should you choose to accept it!) is to carve out some space in your schedule and do just that: ask the questions and then take the appropriate action.

And to help you get started on it, we're going to close out our time together with a short period of reflection.

In the program which you received when you came in today there is an index card. I'd like for everyone right now to take it out and get something to write with. If you don't have an index

card, please raise your hand so that our ushers can give you one, or you can use the response card that's in the seatback in front of you.

Now, in just a minute, the band is going to a song and while that happens, I want you to take that card and write down your answers to the questions.

- What situation or person am I avoiding out of fear? What or who needs to be confronted?
- Who am I holding a grudge against? Who do I need to forgive?
- What losses have I suffered that cause me to cringe or wince when I think of them? What needs to be lamented?

You don't need to go into detail – maybe just write initials or some kind of abbreviation that represents the situation. And you don't need to list out every person or situation. This is just a start on the process.

And then, once you've done that, I want you to bring your card up to the to the front and lay it on the stage as a symbolic way of “casting your cares on Jesus for He cares for you.”

And then go back to your seat because there's one more thing we're going to do before we leave today. Ok?

Let me pray and then we'll begin.

Holy Spirit, we invite you to speak

to us now.

We invite you to reveal the condition of our heart as we think about these things.

Amen.

Here we go.

Feature – Hello My Old Heart

Let's pray.

Lord, these cards represent the damage done to our hearts and minds from the pain of living in a sin-cursed world.

They represent people and situations we need to deal with

instead of avoid; people we need to forgive and losses we need to lament.

I pray that this week, as we enter into these processes, that you would begin to clear out the toxins that are poisoning our hearts, our minds and our souls. I pray that you would fill us with joy and peace and a sound mind.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, before we leave, we're going to sing one more song together.

And this song, in the light of everything on this stage, is a statement of faith. It's a declaration that we trust that God can give us the power and strength to

handle all of these things and that it can be well with us.

It may not be today. And it may never be perfect. But our wounds can be healed and our scars can be a sign of His grace in our lives.

So, let's stand and sing "It Is Well" and then we'll be dismissed.

Congregational Song – It Is Well

Endnotes

ⁱ Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

ⁱⁱ <http://time.com/5163576/ignoring-your-emotions-bad-for-your-health/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/counsellor-articles/spiralling-cycles-of-anxiety-and-avoidance>

^{iv} <https://www.learning-mind.com/conflict-avoidance/>

^v

https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/healthy_aging/healthy_connections/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it

^{vi}

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/supersurvivors/201309/g-rudge-match-can-unforgiveness-be-bad-our-health>

vii <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-theater-the-brain/201503/mourning-death-loss-trauma-and-psychotherapy> and <http://robertberezin.com/mourning-is-the-key/>

viii <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-hardy/201309/about-complicated-bereavement-disorder-0>
ix

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/supersurvivors/201309/grudge-match-can-unforgiveness-be-bad-our-health>

^x Bob Kellerman, see <http://www.rpmministries.org/category/lament/>