

Week 2: What Shapes Our Emotions?

NCAC Adult Sunday School

September 8, 2019

Untangling Emotions



What do you remember from our class last week?

Course Goal: To better understand why we feel what we feel and to learn how to engage with our emotions in ways that promote personal health and lead to deeper relationships with God and others.

Key Resource: *Untangling Emotions* by J. Alasdair Groves and Winston T. Smith (Crossway, 2019)

Course Outline: For our course, we're following the outline of the book *Untangling Emotions*:

Part 1: Understanding Emotions

Part 2: Engaging Emotions

Part 3: Engaging the Hardest Emotions

LAST WEEK:

- Our emotions are fundamentally a reflection of what we love and value. When we get what we love, we're happy. When it's taken from us, we get mad. When others get it, we're envious.
- Emotions are thus meant to serve as "gauges, not guides." By telling us what we love and value, our emotions help us to know the condition of our heart and where correction might be needed.
- The more we grow in love for God, the more our emotions will come to naturally reflect God's heart as we learn to—like God—delight in what is good and hate what is evil.
- As we strive to align our hearts with God's heart so that we love what He loves and feel what He feels, we will also find ourselves entering into a deeper relationship with God.
- Likewise, when we learn to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "weep with those who weep" we not only reflect Christ's love, but we will also deepen our connection with other people.
- Understanding and engaging our emotions is complicated by the fact that we often feel *multiple* emotions at the same time—a reflection of the fact that there are many loves in our hearts.

How would you explain why it's not just inevitable, but good that we feel mixed emotions?

The complexity of emotions means countless things impact how we feel. However, two influences that have a particularly strong impact on our emotions are our bodies and our communities.

OUR EMOTIONS ARE INFLUENCED BY OUR BODIES

“Your emotions don’t happen in the abstract; *they happen in your body*. Responding with emotion to something literally causes a physical reaction in your skin, your brain, and your blood. Have you ever stopped to reflect how odd, how nearly magical this is? Someone can say words into a phone a thousand miles away and make the hair on the back of your neck stand up...That we can change the flow of another person’s blood and brain chemistry by using mere syllables is a testimony to how profoundly God has made us creatures of meaning, beings whose lives and loves matter.” (UE, p. 53)

What are some other ways that our emotions can impact and affect our bodies?

What are some ways that our bodies can impact and influence our emotions?

Though God made our bodies to desire and to emote, how have you seen the results of sin on our bodies have a skewing effect on our emotions?

Even though our bodies are impacted by sin, we should not allow our bodies—even an imbalance in chemistry—to become an excuse for not trying to engage inappropriate emotions:

“No matter how much we come to understand about the biology of our brains, we will still always need to wrestle with our emotions as expressions of what we love. While some people’s bodies are much more sensitive to emotions than others, all of us experience the benefit (and the problem) of having our bodies stirred by the endlessly flowing stream of our emotions. At the core, dealing with difficult (or absent emotions) always comes back to growing in love for what God loves, hate for what God hates, and an ever-deepening relationship with God through every emotion...even when our bodies are influencing the mixture, it doesn’t mean that our hearts no longer matter or that the help of the living God and his Word have to take a back seat. It always makes a difference when we bring our hearts to him and receive his grace, even if that is the grace to endure one more day of our body flooding us with a flat-gray numbness” (UE, p. 64-65)

Does the idea that your body can influence, but not totally control, your emotions relieve you or discourage you? Why?

OUR EMOTIONS ARE INFLUENCED BY OUR COMMUNITIES

How have you found your emotions influenced by the emotions or experiences of others?

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body... ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:12, 26)

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 15:12)

What should these truths mean for how our emotions should be impacted by our relationships?

“When you are hurting, those most closely connected to you should respond, and vice versa. And when something good happens to you and you are happy, they should be happy right along with you, and vice versa. To be deeply connected means to enter into the experience of the other, to feel it right along with them, whether the feeling is good or bad.” (UE, p. 69)

So, how do we enter into another person’s emotions?

1. **Remember that sharing in another persons’ emotions is a key way that we love them.** By striving to share in their emotions, you are communicating that you love and value them.
2. **Pray and ask God to help you enter into the emotions of those around you.** Ask God to help you learn to better connect with the emotions of others in your life.
3. **Start by cultivating curiosity.** Make it a goal to seek to identify and understand the emotions of those around you. Pay attention. Ask questions.
4. **Focus on the other person, not yourself.** It’s hard to enter into someone else’s feelings when we’re focused on ourselves. Invite others to talk and then learn to listen.
5. **Seek honest vulnerability in how you share your own emotions with others.** Sharing your own heart is essential to building deep relationships—but make sure that your sharing doesn’t come at the expense of listening!

What have you found helpful for connecting with others on an emotional level?

OUR EMOTIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT TO CONTROL

What are some emotions that you find particularly difficult to control?

If we were to presume that people are able to control their emotions and change them as an act of their will, how would we try to minister to them?

If we were to presume that people's emotions are beyond their control, how would we try to minister to them?

However, if we expect people's emotions to be a reflection of what they love and treasure, how should we try to minister to them?

Read Psalm 42, an account of a man wrestling with his emotions and seeking change:

¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
"Where is your God?"

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation ⁶ and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock:
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

What emotions are expressed in this Psalm?

What factors are contributing to the psalmist feeling the way that he does?

What does the psalmist do to try to reshape his emotions? (And how successful is he?)

“The lack of immediate change in the psalmist’s feelings doesn’t mean that his battle with his feelings is pointless. Nor does it mean that he’s fighting poorly. It simply means that he is human, and that the world around him must change at a significant level for his emotions to change. Rather than selecting our emotions on a whim off a menu of ways to feel, God gave us emotions that are actually designed not to change unless what we love changes or what is happening to the thing we love changes.” (*UE, p. 77*)