

## Week 1: Understanding Emotions

NCAC Adult Sunday School

September 1, 2019

# Untangling Emotions



**What are some questions you have about emotions?**

**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.

**All of us are sometimes troubled by our emotions.** Emotions are often strange and complex. Our emotions play a significant role in our lives, and can lead us to do and say things that we later regret. Yet often we don't really understand our emotions or know how to properly engage them. Sometimes we don't know why we're feeling what we're feeling at any given moment. Sometimes we don't even know what we're feeling at any given moment.

**Christians are often troubled by their emotions *more than others are.*** There's a sense in which Christians can feel as though they can't get it right no matter how they feel:

Christians often see negative or "bad" emotions as signs of spiritual failure:

- Anxiety can be viewed as "proof you don't trust God."
- Grief may be considered "failure to rest in God's good purposes for your life."
- Anger could be a product of "just plain old selfishness."

Likewise, Christians can also be uneasy with positive emotions:

- Excitement can be seen as a sign that you are "loving the gift more than the Giver."
- A sense of accomplishment over a job well done may be viewed as "a cover for pride."
- Happiness could mean "you aren't in tune with the needs of those around you."

**The Bible is full of commands regarding our emotions:**

- God is looking for obedience that flows from a heart that is glad to serve Him:  
*"Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart in all your abundance, you will serve your enemies the LORD will send against you in famine, thirst, nakedness, and destitution." (Deuteronomy 28:47-48)*  
*"But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed." (Romans 6:17)*

- God tells us what to fear and what not to fear:  
*“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4-5)*
- God tells us what we must and must not delight in:  
*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4).*
- God tells us how we can and cannot be angry:  
*“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Ephesians 4:26).*
- God tells us what we must hate and what we must love:  
*“Abhor what is evil.” (Romans 12:9)*  
*“Love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)*

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

**Course Outline:** For our course, we’re going to basically follow the outline of “Untangling Emotions”:

### **Part 1: Understanding Emotions**

- What exactly are emotions? What makes us feel what we feel?
- Why did God create us to feel? What are emotions designed to do?
- Why is it sometimes good to feel bad? Why is it sometimes bad to feel good?

### **Part 2: Engaging Emotions**

- What are some unhelpful ways of responding to our emotions?
- How do we nourish healthy emotions? How do we starve unhealthy emotions?
- How can we engage emotions in ways which lead to deeper relationships with God and others?

### **Part 3: Engaging the Hardest Emotions**

- How do we engage with stubborn, troublesome emotions like fear, anger and grief?
- How can such emotions become a blessing that help us connect with God and others?
- How can we help others who are struggling with their emotions?

*“We don’t just want to help you think differently about your emotions; we also want to help you do things that make a difference in your day tomorrow as you parent fussy children, enjoy coffee with friends, take out the trash, work through conflict with your spouse, sing in church, cry in the bathroom, or find a quiet moment to read. Our prayer is that as you read this book God would nurture your emotional life in the midst of both the real and troubling problems in the world around you and the perfect promises of God.” (Untangling Emotions (UE), p. 19)*

## WHY IS IT SOMETIMES GOOD TO FEEL BAD?

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**What truths can we discern by considering just the two words “Jesus wept” of John 11:35?**

**What additional truths can we discern when we consider the words “Jesus wept” in context?**

**What are examples of emotions we might call “negative”? Of emotions we might call “positive”?**

*“The Bible teaches...that sadness, anger, dismay, and even fear have a good and right place. Most of us are deeply uncomfortable with negative feelings and assume something is wrong with us whenever we do feel sad or mad or bad. Surely, we think, if we just had more faith, a better perspective, more strength of character, we wouldn’t feel this way. Or, at the very least, we’d get over it faster.” (UE, p. 24)*

**For example, as Paul said:** *“For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it), for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:8-10)*

**Job was not called a sinner when he grieved over the death of his children:** *“Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship.” (Job 1:20)*

**God often rightly expresses “negative” emotions:**

- **God gets angry:** *“On this account the anger of the LORD burned against His people...” (Isa. 5:25)*
- **God hates:** *“There are six things that the Lord hates...haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood...” (Proverbs 6:16-17)*
- **God grieves:** *“But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit...” (Isaiah 63:10a)*

**What are some other examples of times “negative” emotions might be right?**

**And, what would be some examples of times “positive” emotions might be wrong?**

*“We need to understand that our darker feelings are not a curse, but a gift. A dangerous gift—sometimes it feels like giving permanent markers to a toddler—but a gift nonetheless. Our emotions—all our emotions—give us a chance to share God’s heart, purpose, and perspective and so to truly be his ‘friends,’ as Jesus calls the disciples at the Last Supper (John 15:15).*

*“A day is coming when we will never again feel sorrow or anger or fear or disgust, because there will be nothing at which to be sorrowful or angry or afraid or disgusted. Until that day, however it is only by entering into both the joys and pains of God’s love for his children that we can live in honest, wise relationship with the One who made us.” (UE, pp. 27-28)*

**How should these truths affect the way we look at other people whose emotions have been a source of suffering for us?**

**For personal reflection:** *Think about someone you’ve been trying to help who has been feeling “negative” emotions. What do their negative emotions say about how they view the world? What specific things do this person’s emotions indicate that he or she feels is broken or damaged?*

## **WHAT EXACTLY ARE EMOTIONS?**

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The debate about what emotions are and what they’re supposed to do has been raging for centuries, and there doesn’t appear to be any consensus. Some philosophers suggest that emotions come from our flesh—so we must learn to *master our bodily impulses* if we’re to get control of our emotions. Others suggest our minds drive our emotions—so we must learn to *master our thoughts* if we’re going to get control of our emotions. The truth is probably a complicated mix of both. And while the Bible doesn’t give us a technical definition about what emotions, the Bible does tell us what emotions do.

**Emotions communicate what we value or love:** *“Perhaps one of the most important things the Bible teaches us about our emotions is that they are an expression of what we value or love...when you get what you love, you are happy. When someone else gets it, you are envious. When someone deprives you of it, you get mad. When you lose it, you grieve.” (UE, pp. 33-34)*

*“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” (Romans 12:9)*

**What are some other examples of values communicated through our emotions?**

*“God designed your emotions to be gauges, not guides. They’re meant to report to you, not rule you. The pattern of your emotions (not every caffeine-induced or sleep-deprived one!) will give you a reading on where your hope is, because they are wired into what you believe and value—and how much.*

*“That’s why emotions such as delight (Ps 37:4), affection (Rom 12:10), fear (Luke 12:5), anger (Ps 37:8) and joy (Ps 5:11) are so important in the Bible. They reveal what your heart loves, trusts, and fears. At Desiring God, we like to say, ‘Pleasure is the measure of your treasure,’ because the emotion of pleasure is a gauge that tells you what you love...*

*“Your emotions are gauges, not guides. Let them tell you where the attack is being made so you can fight it with the right promises.” (J. Bloom, “Your Emotions Are a Gauge, Not a Guide,” Desiring God)*

**Emotions can help us to connect with other people:** *“Take a mental inventory of the people you feel closest to. It’s likely you’ve had some experiences with them in which you’ve shared some of your deepest thoughts and feelings, or at least both experienced strong emotions. There’s a very good reason for that. Sharing in the experiences of others is fundamental to the very nature of love.” (UE, p. 36).*

*“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:9)*

**How have you experienced or observed emotions helping people connect?**

**Emotions motivate us to action:** *“The motivational aspect of our emotions is God’s way of helping us put our values in to action. Through the energy anger provides, whether to intervene in a perceived wrong or to flee a dangerous situation, our emotions are constantly spurring us to further God’s purposes in our lives.” (Untangling Emotions, p. 37)*

*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son...” (John 3:16a)*

**What would be some biblical examples of emotions motivating us to action?**

**Emotions are an expression of worship:** *“Every emotion you feel reflects your loves, or what you worship. This is easy to see in terms of joy, thanks and awe. But it’s equally true of sorrow, guilt and distress! Where godly joy, for example, flows from a heart that treasures what God treasures and sees God’s purposes advancing, godly distress comes from a heart that treasures what God treasures and sees his will being violated.” (Untangling Emotions, p. 39)*

*<sup>37</sup>And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the great and first commandment.” (Matthew 22:37)*

**For personal reflection:** *What was a recent emotion you remember feeling?*

*What did it communicate about what you value or love?*

*What action did it push you toward?*

*How did it—or how could it—impact your relationships with other people?*

*In what way did it turn you toward (or away from) God?*

## **EMOTIONS DON'T COME IN SINGLE FILE**

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Sometimes it can be hard to understand our feelings because we're blind to what we're really loving, but often the confusion comes from the fact that emotions seldom come in a single file—that is, often what we feel is a mix of different, sometimes conflicting, emotions. The reason is simple: You love *many* things! So, if what you love shapes what you feel, then the fact that you're always responding to multiple pieces of the world around you means you're always experiencing *multiple* emotions at once.

**Jesus often felt mixed emotions:** *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:27)*

**Paul spoke of himself at times feeling mixed emotions:** *“...as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...” (2 Corinthians 6:9)*

**Paul affirmed other believers in feeling a mix of emotions:** *“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)*

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

**What are the dangers of ignoring the mixed nature of emotions?**

**What are the dangers of trying to endlessly identify every emotion in our hearts?**