



The Theology of Emotions

Introductory Counseling Session

Question #3 – Counseling Exam:

Provide a biblical theology of emotions. What role should a counselor allow a counselee's emotions to play in counseling? How can one tell the difference between sinful emotions and righteous emotions? How would you use Scripture to help a counselee change improper emotions?

Does the Bible Use the Word “Emotion”?

- The word emotion is not found in such translations as the LEB, NASB, ESV, NIV, NKJV.
- However, in HSB, Amplified, CSB, and God’s word, we see the word “emotion,” but it is rare.
- Psalm 7: 9 says, “Let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous. The One who examines the thoughts and emotions is a righteous God. (HCSB)
- The NASB translates this as minds (with a footnote). It is literally the work kidneys (kilyah). The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT) indicates that this word is used to refer “to the innermost, most secret part of man.”

Does the Bible Use the Word “Emotion”?

- Genesis 43:30 — Joseph hurried out for he was deeply stirred over his brother, and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there.
- Two words are used to indicate how strongly Joseph’s compassion was stirred within himself. Literally it says his compassions were caused to be aroused within himself.
- The expression of emotions is prominent throughout the pages of Scripture

The Heart is Involved in Our Emotions. So, How Should We View the Heart?

- Heart - The heart is the “center” of the personality, the person himself in his most basic character. Scripture represents it as the source of thought, of volition, of attitude, of speech. It is also the seat of moral knowledge (see Exod. 35:5; 1 Sam. 2:1; 2 Sam. 7:3; Ps 4:4; 7:10; 15:2; Isa. 6:10; Matt. 5:8; 12:34; 22:37; Eph. 1:18, etc.). —John Frame”
- The “heart” commonly refers to the mind as the center of thinking and reason (Prov. 3:3; 6:21; 7:3), but also includes the emotions (Prov. 15:15, 30), the will (Prov. 11:20; 14:14), and thus, the whole inner being (Prov. 3:5). The heart is the depository of all wisdom and the source of whatever affects speech (Prov. 3:24), sight (Prov 3:25), and conduct (Prov 3:26, 27). —John MacArthur

Emotions defined:

- Our working definition (from ACBC on “Emotions”)
 - Emotions are outwardly expressed personal responses to life events and perceptions of reality that reveal the thoughts, desires, and motivations of the inner person. They are either oriented toward God or toward self.

Emotions – Key Principles

- Emotions are God-given and good. They can, however, be used wrongly. If they are misused, they will mislead. Thus, one can respond wrongly to the emotion(s).
- Emotions are instruments of measurement. Emotions measure (report) the temperature of your soul as you interact with life (Jay Adams). *As instruments of measurement emotions cannot tell one how they ought to live.* Emotions report “is-ness,” but never “ought-ness.” Emotions are more a thermometer than thermostat. Your thermostat is your thinking (informed by Scripture—The Word is THE thermostat). Thinking sets the desired temperature, and emotions report the actual temperature.

Emotions – Key Principles

- Emotions act as warning devices. They alert you to problem(s). Thus, there is no such thing as “an emotional problem”. Also, there is no such thing “damaged emotions” or “emotional wounds.” When you are anxious, you do not have an emotional problem. If you do not trust God (or see circumstance as bigger than Him), you should (indeed, you must be anxious (cf. Isaiah 26:3-4).
- As warning devices, one should think seriously before dulling or suppressing emotions. A great concern with psychotropic medicine is it that these medicines bring real side effects and withdrawal concerns. This is a great threat is to your soul. Hosea 5:15 warns us that the “distress” God gives is intended to drive one to repentance. To dull the negative effects of the soul being etched upon the body removes the impetus for repentance.

Emotions – Key Principles

- Emotions are spontaneous, un-commanded, and self-focused (meaning that your emotions are yours—they report the temperature of your soul, not somebody else’s).
- Emotions are “organic bodily responses that are largely involuntary and are triggered by behavior, thoughts, and attitudes” (Jay Adams). For example, it is one’s conscience that triggers both emotional and visceral bodily responses to judgments passed upon attitudes and actions.
- Rom 2:15: “in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them).

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Emotions and Conscience

- The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong. Consciousness means awareness or sense. The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.” What you believe is right and wrong is not necessarily the same as what actually is right and wrong. Martin Luther’s famous statement nails it: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.” Conscience functions as a guide, monitor, witness, and judge.
- The Word of God judges the thoughts and intentions (Heb 4:12).

Emotions and Bodily Responses

- These judgments release chemicals into the body to orient the body to respond. They are triggered by:
 - “immediate conscious thought and/or action, or
 - unconscious habit patterns that automatically release emotional responses” – Jay Adams.
- There is an appropriate emotional response to every circumstance. If the soul interacts well with circumstance, the emotions expressed will be the right “temperature.” We train ourselves, as it were, to respond in a certain way. It becomes a well-worn pattern.

Emotions Experiences

- Emotional experiences are never the goal, but byproducts of thoughts/actions. Positive emotions result from an encounter with Christ...Christ is the goal—joy the byproduct. John 17:3 “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. V.13 “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves.
- Heb 12:2 for the joy set before Him He endure the cross.
- One must live life in this order (1) think (2) act (3) emote...and indeed, the last is automatic. Think "what will please God?", and then act in concert...your emotions will take care of themselves (cf. Adams, Manual, 115). Discipline yourself to say “I think” instead of “I feel”. Doing so will help your counselee change in this area.

Distinguishing between Sinful and Righteous Emotions

- This distinction hinges on origin. While emotions often appear in biblical lists of sins—such as jealousy, anger, and envy in Galatians 5:19–21—Scripture recognizes the full range of human feeling. Righteous emotions flow from God-honoring thoughts and desires, while sinful emotions stem from worldly or self-centered motivations. As believers align their thinking and desires with God’s character, emotions naturally follow suit.
- The counselor helps the counselee move toward peace through the “Put off/Put on” principle—replacing destructive thought patterns with biblical truth. Rather than directly targeting emotions, counselors work on reshaping thoughts and desires, understanding that emotions cannot be transformed apart from this cognitive and volitional work. Counselees benefit from journaling thoughts and emotions while deliberately focusing on Scripture rather than feelings or faulty beliefs, allowing God’s Word to reshape the internal convictions that generate emotional responses.

When Emotions are Driving Our Behavior/Actions

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When Emotions are Driving Our Behavior/Actions

- Venting emotions is not helpful to solving problems. Emotional responses motivate to action. Venting hurt, for example, not only does not solve anything, but actually complicates the situation. There are at least five concerns with venting:
 - Solves nothing
 - Wastes energy God gave to solve problem
 - Turns the desire of the counselee toward commiseration and loses focus on truth and heart motives. Jesus Christ is Lord in all circumstances: 2 Corinthians 4:5
 - Eventually impugns God (a complaint) Jonah 4
 - Points to a replacement Savior (Venting becomes a substitute for going to Jesus, My Savior!

Scripture Commands Us to Live by Thinking

- Thinking is often referred to as having sober judgement, be sober or sober-minded.
- Greek: *nēphō*; to be calm and collected in spirit; to be temperate, dispassionate, circumspect (Strongs). The word can be used literally, abstinence from alcohol or “figuratively indicting complete clarity of mind and its resulting good judgment” (Budd, NIDNTT, Vol I, 514; bold italics added). See 1 Thess 5:6, 8; 2 Tim 4:5, 1 Pet 1:13, 4:7, 5:8, compare with Roman 12:1-3.
- If one would honor God in suffering (including being sinned against by other), when correcting opponents, in avoiding false teaching, in prayer, and in resisting Satan’s lies....one **MUST** think well.

Sober-Minded in Suffering

- 4 Commands given in 1 Peter 5:6-11 to the suffering churches to whom Peter is writing.
 - 1. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the might hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.
 - 2. Casting all your anxieties on Him, because he cares for you.
 - 3. Be sober-minded (be watchful), you adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion.
 - 4. Resist Him, firm in your faith

Key Principles - Peter Direct us to:

- 1. Knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brothers (fellow believers) who are in the world.
- 2. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace,
 - a. Who called you to his eternal glory
 - b. Will himself restore, strengthen, and establish you
 - c. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Application:

1. Suffering is the perfect time for one to trust in themselves and not God—this would be true if reliance upon self were a consistent theme in one's life.
2. Suffering must agitate or amplify (squeeze out) what is already in the soul, i.e., pride. Suffering says “NO” to your soul's delights. Pride says, “no one can deny what I deserve.”
3. Pride is a worse enemy than suffering. Let trauma informed inclined people be corrected. That which keeps you from God is unbelief, not suffering (Heb 3:12). Suffering should drive one to God. God uses suffering to melt self-sufficiency (2 Cor 1:9).
4. If one is going to do well in suffering—and by do “well” we mean honor God—then one will have to fight against what they “feel” and live by faith—trusting in the goodness, greatness, and wisdom of God.

Other Scripture Passages

- 2 Tim 2:3, 7-9 [Consider what I say – to be mindful of, remember, call to mind]
- Know, think, call to mind, this is what we see in Jacob and Joseph's trust in the Lord:
- Joseph trusted in God's purposes (Gen 45:5-9)
- Jacob also trusted in God's person (Gen 46:3-4)
- Jacob trusted in God's promises (Gen 47:29-31; promise found in Gen 28:15).
- Rom 12:1-3 we live by thinking but a thinking that has been transformed!
- 2 Cor 3:18 — But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

Renewed in the Spirit of your Mind

Ephesians 4:22–24

“that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

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Questions?

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