

Dashboard: Emotions
Delivered January 15, 2012

Most days I feel like I have a pretty steady temperament. I generally don't get too high or too low about most of the things that I experience. Rita will tell you that I'm pretty emotionally even-keeled, so much so that at times I probably frustrate her because I don't show enough emotion. I also know that, at times, this can come across to others as if I'm not very empathetic, or even very emotional at all.

But there are some days that it feels like my emotions are very close to the surface. Usually if I'm honest, the good emotions are not the ones close to the surface either. Those days seem to coincide with the days that my kids are frustrating me either with their attitudes, their behavior or both. Those are the days when I have a hard time reining in my words and attitude and I seem to fall off that even-keeled emotional state.

I react in anger that is out of proportion to the situation. I might yell. I might threaten to take things away from the kids that I never intend to follow through on. I might get touchy when my wife asks me why I'm yelling at the kids. I might even give off a slight attitude in the process. But what I've learned about myself over the years is that these days most often are not caused by my kids' behavior, or my wife's questions – they are usually the result of what's going on inside my heart and mind that has very little if anything to do with them.

There are days that I feel totally spent, exhausted in a way that has nothing to do with how tired my body is and has much more to do with how tired my soul is – a deeper level of tired. The problem, of course, is that I have a hard time recognizing it at that moment. I often don't see it coming until after the train has already hit me. I wear down, and then when I wear down my emotions tend to get off kilter, and when they're off kilter, they don't tend to do good things for me or for anyone else.

My experience is probably not unique either. Especially when it comes to men, we don't do a great job of "keeping in touch with our emotions" (whatever that may mean), and we do an even worse job of understanding the things that lead us to get off kilter emotionally. We don't tend to ask what it means to be emotionally healthy, because when we get into those kinds of discussions we feel out of our league.

We may think women are supposed to be better with that "stuff", but the truth is that whether you're a woman or a man, you wrestle with your emotions from time to time. And whether you're a woman or a man, sometimes it's hard to put words to the emotions we're feeling, and even more difficult perhaps to explain why we are feeling those emotions. We look at them as the wishy-washy, insubstantial things we can't put into any kind of concrete terms. So we tend to vacillate between attempting to ignore our emotions completely, and being ruled by our emotions to the degree that we can't seem to function without being overwhelmed by them.

The way to emotional health, however, lies between the two extremes. That middle way has to do with acknowledging the place emotion plays in our lives, and owning the reality that God created us with these emotions as part of our makeup. It also involves checking to see how our emotions are lining up with the way God wants them to be

used in our lives, making sure that they fall in line with the kind of human being God wants us to be.

So let's read together from **Galatians 5:19-26** to see what the Scriptures say about an emotionally healthy life.

In the passage, Paul sets up a pretty clear contrast from the opening verses 19-21 to the closing verses 22-26. The contrast is between the works of the sinful nature, or the flesh, and the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in the lives of those who follow Jesus. The person who is not healthy spiritually is under the direction of the sinful nature whose works are unhealthy. Both the actions and emotions that are described in those opening verses are bad for us, and bad for those who are in relationship with us. Jealousy, envy, selfish ambition, discord, anger and the like – these paint the picture of what we could all probably identify as an emotionally unhealthy life.

And it's not that Paul sets out an exhaustive list – we could certainly add some of our own descriptions to his as well, and I would be surprised this morning if every one of us didn't check the gauge on some of these and find that in at least an area or two our gauge is telling us that we have a problem. It may be anger, may be jealousy, may be selfish ambition, but in both our attitudes and actions which express these emotions, I think these words may be warning bells letting us know that we need to pay attention to what's going on inside of us.

On the other side he sets out a much more positive picture so we can see the picture of a truly healthy life, which is a truly emotionally healthy life. As with everything for Paul this begins as a Spiritual work, with God by his Holy Spirit shaping us into the new men and women that he wants us to be, so the roots of that emotionally healthy life are found back in the message we did last week on moving towards a Spiritually healthy life. If you look back through Galatians 5 you find different references towards this work of the Spirit in those who are following Jesus – we are being led by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, and our lives are moving towards true Spiritual health.

The natural result of the Spirit's work is evident in the fruit produced. This fruit, as Paul describes it here however, has a very "emotional" quality to it. There are several other lists like this in the New Testament, and they are remarkably consistent in the words, phrases and ideas that they use to convey the Spirit's work in us. Something changes for the follower of Jesus that is deeper than just a surface level change – a qualitative change takes place affecting our inner life before it affects our outer life.

The overall picture is of a person who has crucified their old, sinful nature with Christ on the cross – those passions, desires and inflamed emotions that set us on fire for destruction are nailed to Christ's cross. That way of life goes to die with Jesus so that a new, Spirit way of life can come alive in us, dwelling within us and changing us from the inside out. Which means that the stuff under the surface of our lives, the emotional things that get buried deep within us, may begin to change before the stuff on the outside changes. In Christ our whole life, emotions included and which can be so hard to deal with because they run so deep, are now under a new director – God's Spirit.

What was diseased in us – whether by our own fault, or by the fault of someone who mistreated you in the past – these are being remade, healed and restored in God's care.

We are being put back together to live the kind of life that God intended us to live, and that is the work only the Spirit can do, so he challenges us to keep in step with the Spirit's work.

Which brings us finally to the part of the passage most of us know better than the rest – the nine words we often call the fruit of the Spirit. But when you read the list and think about what Paul writes from an emotional, soul level perspective it is quite a compelling picture of a healthy emotional life. I chose not to go word by word through these nine so we could instead focus on the first and last words, because I think they are really key to our understanding of living an emotionally healthy life.

The first word is love, and we shouldn't be surprised to find it at the head of this list. In the Scriptures, everything flows from love. It is the word that is used to describe God's posture towards the world, it is the word used to describe God's action in sending Jesus into the world to bring us salvation, and it is the word used to let us know that even when no one else seems to find us valuable, God looks on us with love. It is far more than just an emotional word, but it is certainly the word that captures one of the most central, powerful human emotions.

When it comes to our emotional health, it is top of the list because this is what we desire above everything else. We want to be loved, and we want to show love. When God's Spirit is truly at work in us, a quality of love begins to pour out of our lives that changes us first, and then changes others who come into contact with it. This is not the "here today, gone tomorrow" kind of love so many have seen and felt – this is a lasting, unconditional, life-changing love that flows from God to us and then through us.

Perhaps the toughest emotional gauge for us to check doesn't feel like an emotional gauge at all – self-control. When the Spirit is at work in your life, there is an awareness about you of what is going on inside of you and the discipline to order those emotions and so that they don't control you. Love leads this list, but self-control holds the whole thing together, because without it we'll never arrive at the kind of patience, kindness or goodness that God intends to characterize our lives.

Self-control, truly led by the Spirit, doesn't lead us to just stuff our emotions down inside. It also doesn't allow us to vomit our emotions all over someone else so that we feel better and they feel worse. Self-control allows us to channel all of that emotion that God is producing in us towards patience, gentleness, faithfulness and the like. This is **how** we keep in step with the Spirit, by disciplining our self (emotions included) to follow his lead and direction.

When you check these gauges this week, I'm guessing you're going to find that there is some work to be done in you to move towards God's intent for you. You're going to find that some of your emotions have gotten unsubmitive to the Spirit's work in you, and God is going to speak to you about reining them back in. I don't expect that by the end of 2012 you're going to be the perfect representation of these nine characteristics, but I do expect that, with the Spirit's power and leading, you're going to make progress towards them. Once again, as your Pastor, part of my role is to help lead you there, so if you haven't yet made an appointment to sit and talk with me to check your gauges, I want to encourage you to do so this week so we can get you moving in the direction of keeping in step with the Holy Spirit's work in you from the inside out.