

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

Week 1—The Problem of Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality

Key Principle: Our spiritual maturity will never grow beyond our emotional maturity (or, we can't be spiritually mature and emotionally immature). Analyzing our emotional maturity and growing emotionally is very important if we want to grow spiritually.

Q. What is your initial response (thought/feeling) to the statement that you can't grow spiritually beyond your emotional maturity?

Different Parts/Components of Who We Are



Ignoring any aspect of who we are as men and women made in God's image always results in destructive consequences—in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

To feel is to be human. To minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of God. To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well.

Americans, as a people/culture, tend to be emotionally stunted. As followers of Jesus, however, we want to grow into the full image of Christ, who was emotionally healthy.

When we ignore the emotional component of our lives, we move through the motions of Christian disciplines, activities, and behaviors, but deeply rooted thought and behavioral patterns from our pasts continue to hinder us from an authentic life of maturity in Christ.

We often neglect to reflect on what is going on inside us and around us (emotional health) and are too busy to slow down to be with God (contemplative spirituality). As a result, we run the high risk of remaining stuck as spiritual infants, failing to develop into spiritually/emotionally mature adults in Christ.

We are not to become “non-persons” when we become Christians. The very opposite is true. God intends our deeper, truer self, which He created, to blossom as we follow Him. God has endowed each of us with certain essential qualities that reflect and express him in a unique way. In fact, an essential part of the sanctification process — becoming more like Jesus—is allowing the Holy Spirit to strip away the false constructs we have accumulated so our true selves in Christ can emerge. (see Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10)

As Parker Palmer said, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

- Q. Describe your relationship with your feelings/emotions. (What do you allow yourself to feel? How do you express your feelings? What feelings are you well acquainted with and which are foreign to you? Do your feelings run your life, or the other extreme, do you suppress them? Do you embrace them or are you afraid of them?)**
- Q. Do you practice “self-care”? How So? How has it benefitted you, and how is it challenging for you?**

The following are the top ten symptoms of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality. Take a few minutes to read it over and put a check mark next to the one or two symptoms that are most relevant in your life today. Afterward, share with the group the one symptom that most applies to your spiritual life today. Also, consider (and share if willing and able) WHY do you think that it.

- **1. Using God to run from God**
(Example: I fill my life with Christian activities to avoid addressing difficult issues in my life.)
- **2. Ignoring the emotions of anger, sadness, and fear**
(Example: I am rarely honest with myself and/or others about the feelings, hurts, and pains beneath the surface of my life.)
- **3. Dying to the wrong things**
(Example: I tend to deny healthy, God-given desires and pleasures of life such as friendships, joy, music, beauty, laughter, and nature. At the same time, I find it difficult to die to my self-protectiveness, defensiveness, lack of vulnerability, and judgmentalism.)

- **4. Denying the past’s impact on the present**
(Example: I rarely consider how my family of origin and significant people/events from my past have shaped my present.)
- **5. Dividing life into “secular” and “sacred” compartments**
(Example: I easily compartmentalize God to “Christian activities” while usually forgetting about him when I am working, shopping, studying, or recreating.)
- **6. Doing for God instead of being with God**
(Example: I tend to evaluate my spirituality based on how much I am doing for God.)
- **7. Spiritualizing away conflict**
(Example: I usually miss out on true peace by smoothing over disagreements, burying tensions, and avoiding conflict, rather than disrupting false peace as Jesus did.)
- **8. Covering over brokenness, weakness, and failure**
(Example: I have a hard time speaking freely about my weaknesses, failures, and mistakes.)
- **9. Living without limits**
(Example: Those close to me would say that I often “try to do it all” or “bite off more than I can chew.”)
- **10. Judging the spiritual journeys of others**
(Example: I often find myself occupied and bothered by the faults of those around me.)

In order to express our emotions, we have to feel safe to do so. There is a fear of the consequences of sharing/expressing how we feel. The church isn’t always considered a safe place to share who we really are. One of our hopes in going through this EHS series is that as a church we will become a safe place for people to be who they are, and then be able to grow into all that Christ has for them. (**HG Leaders, you will be key in this effort.**)

Q. As we embark on this EHS journey together, what scares you? What excites you?

Q. To whom are you comfortable sharing your feelings with?

(If you are interested in taking an assessment to gauge your emotional/spiritual maturity (for free), go to www.emotionallyhealthy.org and scroll down to The EHS Personal Assessment.)

(Below is an excerpt from Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzero)

A person can grow emotionally healthy without Christ. In fact, I can think of a number of non-Christian people who are more loving, balanced, and civil than many church members I know (including myself!). At the same time, a person can be deeply committed to contemplative spirituality, even to the point of taking a monastic vow, and remain emotionally unaware and socially maladjusted.

How can this be?

Few Christians committed to contemplative spirituality integrate the inner workings of emotional health. At the same time few people committed to emotional health integrate contemplative spirituality. Both are powerful, life-changing emphases when engaged in separately. But *together* they offer nothing short of a spiritual revolution, transforming the hidden places deep beneath the surface. When emotional health and contemplative spirituality are interwoven together in an individual's life, a small group, a church, a university fellowship, or a community, people's lives are dramatically transformed.

Defining Emotional Health and Contemplative Spirituality

Emotional health is concerned with such things as:

- naming, recognizing, and managing our own feelings;
- identifying with and having active compassion for others;
- initiating and maintaining close and meaningful relationships;
- breaking free from self-destructive patterns;
- being aware of how our past impacts our present;
- developing the capacity to express our thoughts and feelings clearly;
- respecting and loving others without having to change them;
- asking for what we need, want, or prefer clearly, directly, and respectfully;
- accurately self-assessing our strengths, limits, and weaknesses and freely sharing them with others;
- learning the capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the perspectives of others;
- integrating our spirituality with our sexuality in a healthy way;
- grieving well.

Contemplative spirituality, on the other hand, is concerned with slowing down to be with God, focusing on such practices as:

- awakening and surrendering to God's love in any and every situation;

- positioning ourselves to hear God and remember his presence in all we do;
- communing with God, allowing him to fully indwell the depth of our being;
- practicing silence, solitude, and a life of unceasing prayer;
- resting attentively in the presence of God;
- understanding our earthly life as a journey of transformation toward ever-increasing union with God;
- finding the true essence of who we are in God;
- loving others out of a life of love for God;
- developing a balanced, harmonious rhythm of life that enables us to be aware of the sacred in all of life;
- adapting historic practices of spirituality that are applicable today;
- allowing our Christian lives to be shaped by the rhythms of the Christian calendar rather than the culture; and
- living in committed community that passionately loves Jesus above all else.

The combination of emotional health and contemplative spirituality addresses what I believe to be the missing piece in much of contemporary Christianity. When practiced together, they unleash the Holy Spirit inside us in order that we might know experientially the power of an authentic life in Christ.

Both Are Needed

The following illustrates well how contemplation and emotional health are different and yet overlap. In a very real sense, both are necessary for loving God, loving ourselves, and loving others. For this reason, these form the outer circle around the diagram.



The greatest commandments, Jesus said, are that we love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul and that we love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40). Contemplation has been defined in many ways throughout history. Brother Lawrence called it

“the pure loving gaze that finds God everywhere.” Francis de Sales described it as “the mind’s loving, unmixed, permanent attention to the things of God.” For this reason, contemplation is the vertical line going upward toward God that cuts through emotional health. We are not simply about experiencing a better quality of life through emotional health. Awareness of and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our lives. We are first and foremost about God revealed in Christ.

At the same time, contemplation is not simply about our relationship with God. It is ultimately the way we see and treat people and the way we look at ourselves. Our relationship with God and relationship with others are two sides of the same coin. If our contemplation or “loving union with God” does not result in a loving union with people, then it is, as 1 John 4:7–21 says so eloquently, not true. Moreover, it is about seeing God in *all* of life, not just in what we might consider the spiritual aspects of life.

Emotional health, on the other hand, concerns itself primarily with loving others well. It connects us to our interior life, making possible the seeing and treating of each individual as worthy of respect, created in the image of God and not just as an object to use. For this reason, self-awareness—knowing what is going on inside of us—is indispensable to emotional health and loving well. In fact, the extent to which we love and respect ourselves is the extent to which we will be able to love and respect others.

At the same time, emotional health is not only about ourselves and our relationships. It also impacts our image of God, including our ability to hear God’s voice and discern his will.

Allow me to share a personal story that illustrates how the tools of *both* emotional health and contemplative spirituality are essential to truly break free from our dysfunctions and illusions. I worked for several years on understanding the impact my family history had on my present relationships. While in an advanced program in marriage and family, my class was given the assignment of interviewing every living member of our families. The goal was to put together the jigsaw puzzle of our family history, to uncover any secrets, and to understand ourselves more accurately within the context of our families. God used that experience to make me aware of numerous generational patterns that negatively impacted my relationship with Geri, our daughters, my coworkers at New Life Fellowship, and myself. By the power of the Holy Spirit, I was able to make specific positive changes for Christ.

Two years later, during a lengthy time of silence and solitude (one of the gifts of contemplative spirituality), I found myself feeling angry at God. I not only yelled at God, I cursed him! I called him a liar. “Your yoke is not easy and light!” I screamed aloud. (Don’t worry. I was by myself.) And even though I felt angry, I wondered where the anger was coming from.

This led me to weeks of meditating and pondering Jesus’ invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28, 30). Over time, I realized that underneath my preaching countless sermons on God’s grace and love, I perceived God as a perfectionist—a demanding taskmaster. But was it really him? Or was it part of my past I was unwilling to look at?

I came to realize during this time of solitude that the god I was serving reflected my earthly parents more than the God of Scripture. “I am never enough,” was how I often felt in my family growing up. Almost unconsciously, I had transferred that perspective to my heavenly Father. No matter what I did, all I could hear God saying to me was, “It is never enough, Pete.” I had never made that connection before.

I was stunned!

My point is this: There are powerful breakthroughs that can take place deep below the surface of our lives when the riches of both contemplative spirituality *and* emotional health are joined together. I have seen this again and again in my own life and in the lives of countless others. Together, they form a refining fire in which God’s love burns away what is false and unreal and his fierce and purifying love sets us free to live in the truth of Jesus.

- Q. As you look over the bullet points of “emotional health”, which describe you and which don’t describe you?**

- Q. As you look over the bullet point of “contemplative spirituality”, which describe your experience and which do not?**