

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality *

Week 7—Grow into an Emotionally Mature Adult

Key Principle: Our greatest command is to Love, which requires viewing others (and ourselves) properly. Developing emotional maturity will allow us to love others well.

In order to be emotionally and spiritually mature there is one thing we need beyond everything else...and that is to be confident and secure in God's love for us. If we aren't confident and secure in God's love for us, we will be limited to how much we can mature emotionally and spiritually.

Why is this the case? One of two things will happen if we don't know God loves us deep in our souls. Either, we will think and feel that we are not loved, maybe even unlovable, and we will then tend to wallow in self-pity, self-loathing, and possibly even self-destructive behavior. Or, we will strive to earn/gain God's love through performance, achievement, trying to "be good". This tends to lead toward self-righteousness, fear-based religion, legalism, "works righteousness", and possibly burnout. Neither of these are good for us; neither of these is what God wants for us.

Before anything else, God wants us to realize His great love for us, and that He, in fact IS Love. If this isn't our starting point in the life of faith, our trajectory will be off, our experience will be miserable, and our growth will be stunted. In order to grow, mature, develop in a healthy and fruitful way, God's love for us must be the foundation in which we build upon. Nothing else will do or satisfy.

Q. Complete this sentence: I know God loves me because....

Q. Deep in your soul, are you confident and secure in God's love for you? Explain. (Perhaps share how you got to that point.) Or, if the answer is now, explain why you question or doubt His love for you.

The goal of the Christian life is to become like Jesus...which means to love well. But we can't love others well, if we haven't first experienced love. We are loved, we are lovable, because God IS Love and He loves us. And because God loves us, we (and every other person on the planet) is, in fact, sacred.

Once we are confident and secure in God's love for us (or at least are growing in the direction of becoming confident and secure—i.e. trusting—in His love for us), we are ready to love others well...which is the mark of an emotionally healthy person.

As I'm sure we all know by now, love is NOT a feeling. Rather, love is a decision of the will, and is expressed/demonstrated in our attitude, words, and actions toward others. In order to love well, there are some skills and practices/habits that are helpful to develop, for example: last week's "daily office" and observing the Sabbath; next week's developing a rule/rhythm of life; spiritual disciplines in general, etc.)

Loving well is the essence of true spirituality. This requires that we experience connection with God, with ourselves, and with other people. God invites us to practice his presence in our daily lives. At the same time, he invites us “to practice the presence of people,” within an awareness of his presence, in our daily relationships. The two are rarely brought together.

Jesus’ profound, contemplative prayer life with his Father resulted in a contemplative presence with people. Love is “to reveal the beauty of another person to themselves,” wrote Jean Vanier—Jesus did that with each person he met. This ability to really listen and pay attention to people was at the very heart of his mission. It could not help but move him to compassion. In the same way, out of our contemplative time with God, we, too, are invited to be prayerfully present to people, revealing their beauty to themselves.

Q. How do you go about “connecting with God”? (Explain the “mechanics” of it...what, when, how, where, etc.) Would you say that “connecting with God” is a regular habit/practice? An occasional occurrence? A joy-filled, life-giving experience? A guilt-ridden, burdensome experience? Etc. (As always, you’re invited and encouraged to be honest as opposed to offering the “Sunday school answer”)

Often our biggest obstacle is ourselves. As M. Scott Peck argues that we are all born narcissists and that learning to grow out of our narcissism is at the heart of the spiritual journey. Developing regular times of connecting with God and connecting with other people practice/habit to develop if we want to grow out of our narcissism and toward loving well.

One way of growing in the area of loving others well is to understand how we manage our expectations in relationships.

EXPECTATIONS are ASSUMPTIONS about what someone SHOULD do. Every time we make an assumption about someone without checking it out, it is likely we are treating them as an “It” and not a “Thou.” Why? We are jumping to conclusions without having checked out the assumption. Consider how you feel when someone is angry with you because you didn’t fulfill their expectations, yet they never communicated this expectation to you. They simply assumed you should know.

Unmet and unclear expectations can create havoc in our places of employment, classrooms, friendships, dating relationships, marriages, sports teams, families, and churches. We expect other people to know what we want before we say it. The problem with most expectations is that they are:

- **Unconscious:** We may have expectations we’re not even aware of until we are disappointed by someone.
- **Unrealistic:** We may develop unrealistic expectations by watching TV, movies, or other people/resources that give false impressions.
- **Unspoken:** We may have never told our spouse, friend, or employee what we expect, yet we are angry when our “expectations” are not met.
- **Un-agreed upon:** We may have had our own thoughts about what was expected, but those thoughts were never agreed upon by the other person.

Exercise: Think of a recent, simple expectation that went unmet and made you angry or disappointed. (Ex.: I expected my husband to accompany me to my office party this past weekend; I expected to socialize with members of my small group outside the meeting times; I expected my teenagers to put their dirty dishes in the dishwasher; I expected my boss to give me at least a 5 percent cost of living raise last year.) Write yours down.

Now compare that unmet expectation with the inventory questions below:

- **Conscious:** Were you conscious (aware) you had this expectation?
- **Realistic:** Is the expectation realistic regarding the other person?
- **Spoken:** Have you clearly spoken the expectation to them or do you just think “they should know”?
- **Agreed upon:** Has the other person agreed to the expectation?

(Remember this principle: Expectations are only valid when they have been mutually agreed upon. These are the expectations we can realistically/reasonably expect.)

Exercise: Below is a description of various stages of emotional health. Take some time to consider which stage best describes you. (Try to avoid the temptation of figuring out what stage other people are at...just focus on yourself.)

EMOTIONAL INFANTS

- Look for others to take care of them
- Have great difficulty entering into the world of others
- Are driven by need for instant gratification
- Use others as objects to meet their needs

EMOTIONAL CHILDREN

- Are content and happy as long as they receive what they want
- Unravel quickly from stress, disappointments, trials
- Interpret disagreements as personal offenses
- Are easily hurt
- Complain, withdraw, manipulate, take revenge, become sarcastic when they don't get their way
- Have great difficulty calmly discussing their needs and wants in a mature, loving way

EMOTIONAL ADOLESCENTS

- Tend to often be defensive
- Are threatened and alarmed by criticism
- Keep score of what they give so they can ask for something later in return

- Deal with conflict poorly, often blaming, appeasing, going to a third party, pouting, or ignoring the issue entirely
- Become preoccupied with themselves
- Have great difficulty truly listening to another person's pain, disappointments, or needs
- Are critical and judgmental

EMOTIONAL ADULTS

- Are able to ask for what they need, want, or prefer—clearly, directly, honestly
- Recognize, manage, and take responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings
- Can, when under stress, state their own beliefs and values without becoming adversarial
- Respect others without having to change them
- Give people room to make mistakes and not be perfect
- Appreciate people for who they are—the good, bad, and ugly—not for what they give back
- Accurately assess their own limits, strengths, and weaknesses and are able to freely discuss them with others
- Are deeply in tune with their own emotional world and able to enter into the feelings, needs, and concerns of others without losing themselves
- Have the capacity to resolve conflict maturely and negotiate solutions that consider the perspectives of others
(If you're willing, share with your group what developmental stage you think you're at. If you're willing, ask for feedback.)

- Q. What challenges are you currently facing in loving others well? More specifically, who are you currently finding it challenging to love well?**
- Q. We've been on this journey toward emotionally healthy spirituality for 7 weeks now. At this point, what do you sense Jesus inviting you to?**
- Q. Fear is typically the # 1 thing that keeps us from loving well. And love is the only thing powerful enough to overcome fear. What role do you sense fear is playing in your life presently? (Or, presently, can you identify anything that you're afraid of, and how is that affecting your life?)**

** The majority of this document is excerpts from the book "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality" by Peter Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-34857-0), and the "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Workbook" by Peter & Geri Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-08519-5)