

The Relationship between Truth and Emotion

by Bryan Gibson

Seemed like a good time to write this article, seeing that more and more people seem to think that emotions trump truth. Let's explore the relationship a little closer, from a Scriptural standpoint, and then issue a couple warnings.

The truth, provided we have a good understanding of it, will produce a wide array of genuine emotions—fear, sorrow, compassion, joy, gratitude, etc. Jesus certainly experienced a range of emotions (Mark 3:5; 11:15-17; Luke 7:13; 10:21; 19:41; Hebrews 5:7), and so did Paul (Acts 20:19, 31; Romans 9:2; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:7, 13; 11:29; Philippians 3:18). No need to ever be ashamed of the emotions which spring from an understanding of truth.

The truth will also regulate our emotions, in several ways. 1) Emotions can be pretty fickle—we feel one way one moment and entirely different the next (e.g. Acts 14:8-19; Galatians 4:14-16). Truth is the great moderator—it can prevent these wild swings of emotion. 2) Emotions can also be misdirected—we feel one way when we should feel another. At Mt. Sinai, the Israelites “rejoiced in the works of their own hands” (Acts 7:41)—in short, they rejoiced in iniquity (see 1 Corinthians 13:6). We've got too many people asking, “How can this be so wrong when it feels so good?” Yet, to his worldly minded readers, James wrote, “Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to gloom” (James 4:9). The truth, properly understood, will direct our emotions in keeping with the truth (see 3 John 1:4). 3) Emotions can also easily get out of control, which is often the case with anger (“outbursts of wrath—Galatians 5:20). There's no better anger management course in the world than the one found in the truth of God's word. 4) Not that there won't be occasional **outpourings** of emotion, but the truth also produces more settled emotions—the kind that produce steadfast, immovable Christians (1 Corinthians 15:58)—a joy that remains with us, even in times of sorrow (John 15:11; 2 Corinthians 6:10); a gratitude that enables us to “give thanks always” (Ephesians 5:20); a fear that will consistently steer us away from “evil” and the “snares of death” (Proverbs 8:13; 14:26-27); etc.

Finally, the truth will root out certain emotions, ones that have no place in the life of a Christian. Self-pity comes way too easily for way too many people, but the truth simply won't allow it, not with its emphasis on self-denial (Matthew 16:24; Luke 14:26; Philippians 2:3-8).

Now, for a couple much needed warnings. First, resist any and all efforts to change God's plan—for any reason, including the desire to generate more emotion. More than anything else, we want people to have conviction, which will in turn produce the genuine emotions we spoke of earlier.

Secondly, don't judge others to be unemotional or lacking in spirituality, simply because they show very few **outward** displays of emotion. There's a far better way to judge the depth of one's faith and love, and their spirituality in general, and that's by consistent service to the Lord.