

Are You EMOTIONALLY MATURE?

BY DAVID C. PACK

In this age, people no longer base decisions and actions on solid moral values. They have been programmed to act according to their feelings. Emotions are something that all Christians must battle. Are you controlling *your* emotions?

A WELL-KNOWN singer once crooned out what became a famous song, titled “Feelings.” My father enjoyed this particular tune, and I came to enjoy it as well. Looking back, it became, in a sense, prophetic of our entire age.

This has been called the age of “feel good.” Most people now make decisions, come to conclusions or react in given situations based almost exclusively on how things *feel* to them. For more than a generation, most human beings have become subtly conditioned—by education, pop psychology and society—to listen to, and stay in tune with, their feelings, as a guide to their course of action in any given situation.

Part of this conditioning involves people having been virtually trained to look for and almost exclusively respond to their FEELINGS. They have even been taught to elevate their feelings to the point of almost continually asking themselves how they feel—about almost everything!

This represents an enormous change in the overall way that most

people think and react—and view the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Here is what is different—what has changed. The vast majority of people, including society as a whole, once generally reacted to circumstances, and the environment around them, based on the VALUES that they had been taught—based on ethics, principles, morals, beliefs, integrity and overall character. This meant that people once viewed matters based much more on *right* versus *wrong*, *good* versus *evil*, *proper* versus *improper*, *wise* versus *unwise*, and even *law* versus *sin*.

Sadly, even tragically, a regard for values of almost any kind now carries very little weight in the thinking of most in the world. Today, hurt feelings, emotions and perceptions have become much more important—have been given much greater credence in people’s thinking—than at probably any other time in human history.

Unbridled Emotion

Think for a moment about the relatively new phenomenon called “road rage.” When some drivers think that they have been cut off in traffic, their

emotions tell them that they have been wronged—even “disrespected.” The result is that they often lash out at the other driver, sometimes chasing and cutting off the “offender,” often with tragic or even fatal results. Stories of such occurrences are becoming more frequent, first in America, but now more so in other countries.

Another trend has appeared in America, called the “fired postal worker syndrome.” Terminated employees are now sometimes said to have “gone postal.” In a violent age, this is a scene that plays out often. Feeling themselves to be victims of injustice, ex-employees are driven by rage to go on a murderous rampage, seeking to cause as much mayhem, destruction, confusion and death as possible. It is as though someone must pay for the “wrong” which they perceive happened to them. This usually puts the boss and fellow-workers in harm’s way.

Children’s sporting events have become another scene in which outrage about a simple call by an umpire can cause emotions to boil over. How often do we hear of parents assaulting—or even, in one case, killing—coaches, umpires or parents at Little League baseball, soccer or other events? Once is too often.

Why is unbridled emotion so rampant today? Why are so many small children completely unable to control their emotions, sometimes throwing public tantrums to what should be the

embarrassment of their parents? (In the past, parents usually *were* more embarrassed in such situations—because they occurred so much less frequently throughout society.)

Why are so few children any longer actively *taught* to control their feelings? The answer lies in the fact that most parents do not know how to control their *own emotions*. (How many times have you seen parents *shout* at their children to “stop shouting,” or *in anger* tell them to “get along”?)

Human nature is selfish—plain and simple! It focuses almost entirely on the needs and concerns of SELF. It is interested solely in what it can GET. Of course, selfishness is inseparable from personal *feelings*. True godly LOVE, on the other hand, is interested in and focused on the needs and concerns of *others*. It is concerned with what it can *give* to others, not what it can get.

Giving is the essence of the Ten Commandments, and defines the love of God (Rom. 13:10; I John 5:3). But children do not instinctively understand giving, or the meaning of true love for others. They are born naturally selfish, grasping and taking. If you doubt this, just watch an infant with his toys. They have to be *taught* to share, and to give.

Most people are never actively taught to grow up emotionally. They are never taught to *develop* and maintain emotional maturity, learning to keep a grip on every kind of human emotion, including rage, jealousy, resentment, vanity, fear, hatred, impatience. In truth, all of these are IMPULSES, flowing from EMOTIONS, which need to be ACTIVELY controlled.

Were you taught as a child to control these things?

“Grow Up”

Did you know that the Bible tells Christians—literally—to “grow up”? It does! Notice: “But speaking the truth in love, may *grow up* into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

The ultimate goal of every Christian is to grow up to be like Christ. This means reflecting the same character

that Christ had, who explained that He had “overcome the world” (John 16:33). The world is filled with raw emotion. Billions have learned to yield to whatever impulses and feelings come naturally to them, generally without advanced notice.

Like many, I have had to learn to control my emotions. I came from a passionate, strong-willed family, and this included virtually everyone in the family. Strong emotions (yet, in our family’s case, never to the point of moodiness) were inseparable from most of my childhood experiences. It was not until God called me into His truth, and I had received His Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), that I learned to actively exercise the fruits of that Spirit. These are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as “Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance [self-control].”

These fruits are also a form of godly emotion—and they actually describe God’s character. In effect, when Christians grow up unto Jesus Christ, they are developing His character—perfect, holy and righteous.

Think for a moment. How many do you know who were actively taught, as children, to develop these qualities—emotions—understanding that these were the very characteristics of God? Almost certainly, none!

Proverbs 22:6 states, “TRAIN UP a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Since children are born naturally selfish, they have to be *trained* in the qualities of God’s character. Of course, only those parents who have learned these things themselves are qualified to do this.

Most people have no idea of the basic, and colossal, difference between animals and human beings. Children are born with MINDS, requiring that they be taught almost everything. Animals are born with BRAINS, having no human spirit (I Cor. 2:11) in them giving them mind power. They do virtually everything by *instinct*, programmed into them by God. Unlike human beings, they are completely unable to grasp—

to comprehend—character-building of *any* kind. They are not subject to sin, passion or unbridled emotion, except as they are instinctively programmed.

Children are totally different, and every wise parent will recognize this. Tiny human beings are born with the capacity to acquire knowledge throughout life. Possessing the ability to reason and think through plans and decisions, they *can* grasp that they must learn to curb and suppress wrong emotions—and that this is intrinsic to strong character. They also have the ability to learn that this is part of the GREAT PURPOSE God has preordained for every human being. Many generations have been taught, according to evolutionary theory, that they are little more than the highest or most developed of dumb beasts.

Parents who care about the emotional stability of their children will carefully monitor their emotions, impulses, feelings and moods, teaching them to withhold and exercise themselves—to become EMOTIONALLY STABLE. So many today are completely UNSTABLE! They have no idea that they are even supposed to control their emotions, let alone *how* to do this, because no one ever taught them. They were never trained in such basic matters, so necessary and vital to ever achieve happiness and joy. Seemingly, most people are trained with little more understanding than that the selfish accumulation of money and physical goods is the central goal of life.

The Bible states that “God is love” (I John 4:8, 16). This is His greatest quality of character and, therefore, is the most important quality that parents should teach little children—but only after first learning it themselves. Instilling the way of give—OUTGOING CONCERN—as the most important component in an emotionally stable person, is crucial beyond words. Here is why.

All-Important Self-Control

God’s Word states, “He that has *no rule over his own spirit* is like a city that is broken down, and without walls” (Prov. 25:28). What a deplorable and tragic condition for anyone to fall

into—and yet, to one degree or another, this is the condition of most people!

The obvious point in this passage is that a city without walls is *defenseless*. It cannot protect itself. It is subject to being overrun by invading armies, bandits or animals.

And so it is with people whose emotions are able to “overrun” them. They lack the “wall” of emotional maturity to protect them from feelings, impulses and emotions—and moods, which are merely emotions extended over a long duration because the person is unable to “pull himself together” and “snap out of it.” Rudeness, anger, emotional outbursts, envy and resentment, unforgiving attitudes, self-pity, sulking, hatred and harboring of bitterness, covetousness, and numerous other wrong attitudes, come and go at will in such weak, defenseless people.

On the other hand, God’s Word also states, “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that *rules his spirit*, than he that takes a city” (Prov. 16:32). This powerful verse reveals how God values people who have developed strong self-control (temperance). In the world, the acclamation—the greatness—of military commanders is often defined by the great cities they capture (“take”). Yet God says that one who can capture—RULE—his own spirit (feelings, attitudes, etc.) is *greater* than any famous general.

Of course, it should go without saying that one who cannot rule himself would *never* be permitted to rule others, as a king and priest beside Christ!

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul taught, “Be temperate (self-controlled) in all things” (I Cor. 9:25). Having self-control in all things is a tall order. In fact, it takes a lifetime to master all the feelings involved in every aspect of life.

Overcoming Anger

All are familiar with those who cannot control outbursts of anger and wrath. Most have experienced what happens when a volcanic personality goes off. Neither witnessing nor being the object of such wrath is pleasant. While we

could study any number of emotions from the Bible’s point of view, let’s examine some of what it says about anger, possibly the rawest and most dangerous emotion, if left unchecked.

Solomon wrote, “He that is soon angry deals foolishly” (Prov. 14:17). How true. So often, people do things in a fit of emotion that they terribly regret, sometimes just moments after it is too late. How many murders have been committed by people who were desperately sorry almost immediately afterwards?

Here is another related verse: “A man of great wrath shall suffer punishment: for if you deliver him, yet you must do it again” (Prov. 19:19). Punishment here could include time in jail for assault and battery. This can be the case with those who have never been taught to control their temper. Such punishment could happen over and over again.

Here is another passage, in this case describing the difference between those who can control themselves and those who cannot: “A wrathful man stirs up strife; but he that is slow to anger appeases strife” (Prov. 15:18). The first part of the verse is clear in meaning. The second half introduces how self-control can actually cause already-existing strife to dissipate. Can you do this?

Solomon adds to the above verse that “A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up strife” (Prov. 15:1). In the face of wrath, most would not be able to control themselves and respond with only “soft words” until the strife is “appeased.” Proverbs 25:15 adds, “By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaks the bone.” God says that even the hardest attitudes can be turned around by soft words—only possible by those who have complete mastery of their emotions in the face of those who do not!

No wonder that Christ said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9). The training, ability and character necessary to be able to make peace—remember, *making* peace can only be done where a state of war exists—is so

important that it is how God defines who are “the children of God” (same verse).

A Time for Emotion

Once again, all emotion is certainly *not* wrong. There are many occasions in which the demonstration of proper emotion can be good.

In regard to anger, consider this: “The discretion of a man defers his anger” (Prov. 19:11). Here, *discretion* is the same as self-control mixed with knowing when anger should be controlled. Now understand. The Bible states that there is a place for proper anger (Matt. 5:22). One of the above verses warned against being “*soon* angry,” and Proverbs 14:29 adds that those who are “*slow* to wrath” are of “great understanding.” There is a time for proper emotion, even anger and wrath, if patience has been exercised, and there is real cause (Matt. 5:22).

Solomon added that “The north wind drives away rain: so does an *angry* countenance a backbiting tongue” (Prov. 25:23). Here, anger, merely in a *look*, serves a positive purpose.

The Bible has much to say about the fruit of JOY. None doubt that this emotion can be wonderfully positive, assuming the joy is not derived as a perverse satisfaction for accomplishing an evil act. Of course, happiness, excitement and enthusiasm are very positive emotions. So are sympathy, gratitude, reverence for God, zeal, sorrow, mercy and compassion. The Bible is filled with verses showing that these qualities, when properly demonstrated, reflect the nature of God.

Make no mistake. God is not an *emotionless* being. He is not the “strong, silent type.” Rather, He can express great emotion, including anger, which He will display for one full year in what the Bible calls the “year of His wrath,” more often referenced as The Day of the Lord.

Which of the fruits of God’s Spirit are not synonymous with emotion? They all are—and they describe God’s character! Recognize that God does not spend His time *suppressing* every feeling and emotion, as a means of

demonstrating “emotional maturity.”

EMOTIONAL MATURITY is knowing when to withhold—suppress—wrong emotions *and* when to properly release, and sometimes openly display, healthy emotions. Impulses and feelings are not wrong of and by themselves. Numerous passages could be cited to show that in certain contexts, love, joy, jealousy, hate (the Psalmist wrote, “I *hate* every false way”), covetousness, fear, and even lust, can be either right or wrong. This depends strictly on when and how they are used.

Properly Worshipping God

The Bible teaches that we must worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). The reference to spirit cannot mean purely physical emotion, as is often thought to be the case in the reli-

gions of this world. There, people actually work up a certain emotion that is generated from human energy, entirely apart from God or self-control. This often results in people leaping and shouting wildly in supposed “religious fervor.” This is because human beings—and human nature—lacking training, are given to extremes.

Notice that worshipping God properly also means doing it “in truth.” The Bible states that “[God’s] word is truth” (John 17:17). Therefore, it is impossible to worship God properly unless one understands what His Word contains. This means actively studying it, seeking to learn how to properly obey God. Obedience to God is necessary for one to receive the Spirit of God (Acts 5:32).

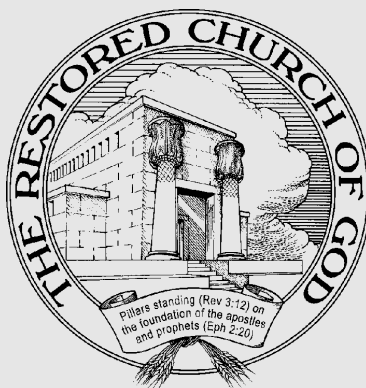
Paul wrote that God’s Spirit reflects “power, love and a sound mind” (II

Tim. 1:7). One with SOUND MINDEDNESS knows when to express and when to withhold emotions. Just from this verse, it is clear that emotional maturity involves a combination of growing up mentally, physically and psychologically to achieve true, full SPIRITUAL MATURITY.

This takes a lifetime. First, admit whether you are emotionally mature or not. Honestly assess your conduct in the light of this article, and God’s Word.

In all likelihood, unless you have actively practiced—as a WAY OF LIFE—controlling your emotions, you have a long way to go. But do not despair (that would be a wrong emotion). Start where you are, recognizing the ancient proverb that “the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” □

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