

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU THINK

Proverbs 23:7

Worship Moment Message

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SCRIPTURE

For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he (Proverbs 23:7 KJV).

MESSAGE

The modern world tries to force us to be anything but our true selves.

An unemployed executive answered an intriguing job ad for the regional zoo. The human resources manager explained that the zoo's gorilla had died, and it was cheaper to hire someone to dress in a gorilla's suit than to get another gorilla. The man was desperate for a job, so he took it. The first day wasn't too bad. He paced the floor, ate the peanuts and bananas thrown to him, and thumped on his chest. The next day, he became bolder and began swinging on the rope tied to an old tree. As he swung, he suddenly lost his grip and fell into the lion's den next door. He jumped to his feet and began to scream, "Help! Help!" The lion came out of his house to see what the noise was all about, then pounced on the man in the gorilla suit. "Shhh! If you don't shut up, we'll both lose our jobs!"

If we want to be our true selves then we need to be careful about what we think.

In 1902, a largely unknown British author by the name of James Allen published a "little volume," as he called it, entitled, *As a Man Thinketh*. It influenced many twentieth century writers including Norman Vincent Peale ("The Power of Positive Thinking"), Earl Nightingale, Denis Waitley and Tony Robbins, among others. Remarkably, the book also summarized much of what would later be called cognitive therapeutic psychology.

The book was based on what is found in Proverbs, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7 KJV). This is taken from the King James Version which, surprisingly, does a better job of capturing the meaning of the passage than many modern translations. The original context was about an unvirtuous person but the principle is valid. A paraphrase of the Hebrew would be something like, "As you plan ahead in your soul, so it shall be in your life." The expectation affects the outcome. One's character is the sum of one's thoughts.

Applying this principle to emotions reveals that emotions are influenced by and often caused by our thoughts, or more specifically, our beliefs. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex subject, let me say there are two pathways to emotion: immediate and reflective.

Immediate emotional responses are often the result of situations involving primal survival. For example, a sudden, loud explosion produces a fear response that enables a person to react quickly to what may be a life-or-death circumstance. So quickly, in fact, that it seems to bypass the conscious mind altogether. It is an immediate emotional response triggered by the explosion.

But most of the time when we talk about our emotional experiences, and the primary way that I will be referring to emotions in this message, has to do with the second category: emotional responses that have come through a reflective filter. To put it another way, even when it comes to our emotions, we are what we think.

If I think that red ties are manifestly offensive then whenever I see someone with a red tie I will get angry. It is no use arguing that this is an irrational belief because it will not change the outcome. The practical issue is not whether it is irrational but whether I believe it. But notice, it is not the tie that causes the anger. It is my belief that leads to the anger. We erroneously think that feelings are a two step process: the event and the response. They are not. Feelings are a three step process: the event, our beliefs, and the response. I am not responding to a red tie. I am responding to my belief about red ties.

Obviously, we need to be careful about what we believe. I am talking about all our beliefs, not just our beliefs about God. We do not often think about these other beliefs. Many come from childhood. Some come from the prevailing culture. Others come from who knows where.

You may have the unspoken belief that you must never fail. You may think that everything bad that happens to you is catastrophic. You may expect a three year-old to act like an adult. You may think that because you have freckles or a long nose or wear glasses that you are somehow less of a person. You may think these things but because they are irrational you will experience emotional turmoil.

Being in a stressful situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can exacerbate this turmoil. People have been reporting that they are more easily irritated, lash out more often at family and friends, use profanity more often, and are more critical of both themselves and others. Behind this escalating emotional turmoil, I suspect, are a number of irrational or unrealistic beliefs. Remember, when we have an emotional response, such as anger, we are not responding to an event but are responding to our beliefs pertaining to that event. When you yell and scream at your three year-old because she did not put her toys away, your anger may be a response to your belief that all three year-olds should behave the same as a mature, responsible adult. The problem does not lie with your child but with what you think about your child. It is your belief that needs to change.

We must learn to challenge our irrational beliefs. One way to do this is by externalizing what we believe. When we write down or say aloud beliefs such as, "Everyone must like me," or, "My family should know what I want without me telling them," then it is easier to recognize how unrealistic they are. This type of exercise improves our emotional health and leads to healthier emotional expression. Furthermore, if our irrational belief has to do with God or faith or Christian living, then this exercise can lead to improved spiritual health, as well.

From home to school, from work to church, from bedroom to battlefield, our emotional experiences profoundly affect who we are and how we behave. Today, most people let their emotions dictate their theology and their ethics. Most church conflicts are not really about theology or ethics but are emotionally-driven. Emotions are the context for the greatest battles the self must wage.¹

An authentic walk of faith involves freedom of feeling. Scripture bids us to express our feelings in a way that is free and honest. Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15 NRSV). There are times to be joyful. There are times to weep.

Unfortunately, many people are afraid of their emotions. This leads either to denial or surrender. Some are so afraid of their emotions that they try to over control them or suppress them. On the other hand, some are overwhelmed by their emotions and they allow their emotions to dominate their lives. Neither way is healthy. Both are driven by fear.

Suppression is not healthy. Suppressing emotion is a lot like putting down one end of a teeter-totter; the other end always pops up. If we try to push our emotions down they will pop up some place else. What pops up may be an ulcer, high blood pressure, headaches or something else.

The freedom to feel is not a license to do anything we please nor is it justification for demanding that others express their feelings in the same way we do (and vice versa). Rather, the freedom to feel means we neither imprison our feelings nor let them imprison us.

In order to experience freedom of feeling we need to overcome fear and be honest about our feelings. Fear is overcome by love. John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18 NRSV). God's perfect love can free us from our fears,

¹Archibald D. Hart, *Unlocking the Mystery of Your Emotions* (Dallas : Word, 1989), ix.

though it may take a lifetime of struggle to fully appreciate that.

The freedom to feel also means learning to be honest with our feelings. Every emotion asks the same question, “Are you going to be honest in this situation?” If our answer is “Yes” then our emotions become our allies. They help us in our walk with Christ. They help us to relate to others. We discover what it means to be real.

We can live with our emotions in such a way that they can help us in our walk with God. If we want to live with our emotions in this way then we need a healthy acceptance of our emotions, a Scripturally informed understanding of our emotions, and a freedom of feeling that is a fruit of the Spirit. This is my hope for those who hear this message. This is my prayer for you and for me.