

Is there a louder cultural message being pushed right now than “follow your heart?” We are constantly being asked to make all sorts of decisions and actions simply on the basis of *emotion*. We live in a time when people are attempting to change their *gender* and their *race* based not on what biology or reality says, but based on *what they feel!* Instead of mind, heart, and will competing as teammates against immaturity and a fractured understanding of the self, we treat them as *enemies* who are fighting each other, and when the emotions win, we all lose.

And the result is what Psalm 42:5 describes: our hearts are not quiet; they are in turmoil. We aren't finding inner peace when the world around is in chaos, we're creating much of that chaos *from within*. And so our country is in crisis: we are stressed, depressed, obsessed, and all the rest. People are not at peace; we are healthier, wealthier, and better cared for than ever before, and yet we are worried and frazzled and turning to all sorts of damaging outlets to try to quiet our tumultuous hearts. We'll take any drug, try any therapy, listen to any guru; we will do *anything* to avoid questioning our hearts and confronting our emotions.

And so one of the most practical things we can learn from the book of Jonah comes from the question that God asks in Jonah 4:4. Jonah knows that he is angry, and he is rushing to act on that anger, but God brings him up short by asking: “Do you do well to be angry?” And what God asks of *anger* is something we need to ask all of our emotions. Instead of trusting our feelings, we need to teach our feelings to trust in Jesus.

And so today, I want to expand on Jonah 4:4, with help from Psalm 42:5, so that we can learn from God how to question and change our hearts by teaching our feelings to bow to King Jesus. And I'll be making three points – 1: **emotions are good servants, but bad masters**. When emotions serve King Jesus, they are a great help. When they take the throne, they became tyrants.

Point number 2: **Questioning the heart *de-thrones* the emotions without *destroying* them**. Emotions are like a fire: great in the fireplace, terrible on the couch. But the answer is not to put out the fire in the fireplace, which has been an unfortunate mistake that many Christians make, especially Reformed Christians! But God wants to teach us how to control our emotions so that we can warm ourselves by the fire without burning the house down.

Point number three: **Jesus is Lord of all, including your emotions. Live like it!** Because Jesus is Lord, He gets to tell you how to feel, and disagreeing with Jesus is sin. Discipling your emotions to follow Jesus leads to a quiet heart, and *freedom* from the tyranny of your feelings.

So let's jump in to point 1: **Emotions are good servants, but bad masters.** The first thing to say is that *emotions are God-given gifts*. God gave us emotions so that we can bear His image, as much as it is possible for creatures to do so! Fundamentally, emotions are good. The goal of Christian maturity is not a sort of Stoic or Hindu overcoming of all feeling. Christian emotional maturity means learning to feel the way God feels about everything in your life.

Your feelings are good gifts; they help make you human. Being “emotional” is not a bad thing! When we meet people who *suppress* and *avoid* normal expressions of emotion, we call them *robots* or *heartless*, something less than fully human. We aren't trying to *delete* our emotions; we're meant to have them and use them. Emotions aren't the problem. *Sin* is the problem.

Emotions send signals that help us respond to the world by guiding our thoughts, actions, and desires. They are a sort of fuel for our soul, powering the engines of the mind to turn the wheels of the will into motion. When our feelings break down and stop doing this good work, this is part of what we call *depression*, which is characterized by a lethargy, an inability to get out of bed. This is why you can't simply *think* or *will* your way out of depression – you need healthy emotions to be doing what God made them to do!

But this is the point that our culture refuses to see: *emotions can be wrong*. This is why a simple, straightforward question like the one God asks Jonah can go off like a *bomb* in the modern soul. The master of our souls is *whatever we don't challenge*, and many people have given that place to *feelings*. We have a hard time believing that there is another way to live besides this enslavement to our emotions!

This week I read a heartbreaking article by the first person in the US to be officially recognized as “non-binary”, neither male nor female. Since then, he has come to his senses and realizes that he is and always was a man, despite what his feelings told him.

But the sadness in his story also comes from the dozens of people in authority (doctors, therapists, judges) who *never challenged* the supremacy of the great god “Feelings” over his life. They enabled his self-destructive efforts to remake his mind and body according to the lies that his emotions were telling him. But *emotions can be wrong*, and so they must be questioned, challenged, and at times rebuked and replaced. When feelings are never questioned, they become tyrannical and self-destructive. Emotions are *good* servants, but *bad* masters.

Point 2: **Questioning the heart dethrones the emotions, but doesn’t destroy them.** As a person made in God’s image, you have a mind for thinking, emotions for feeling, and a will for doing. When these faculties are working together, the result is maturity and wholeness. You are integrated as a person, instead of being fractured and fragmented.

The discipline of questioning the heart takes place when you involve the mind and the will in the discussion that your emotions are having with your soul. You involve the *mind* when you ask the emotions for *reasons*. Soul, *why* are you cast down? *Why* are you angry or sad or joyful? Notice that: even what we consider *positive* emotions must not be allowed to rule – the movie “Inside Out” does a great job teaching this lesson – James 4:9 tells us to *stop laughing* and *start weeping* when it comes to sin.

Sometimes joy must give way to sadness for us to be healthy and whole. And so involving the mind means asking questions: is this emotion *appropriate* for this situation? Is this level of emotional response *proportionate*? Ie, *should I* be angry/happy/sad over this? Should I be *this* angry/happy/sad?

And you involve the *will* when you consider *what to do* with your emotions. Should I laugh? Should I cry? Should I shout? Should I shut up? Should I give her a hug? Should I punch him in the face? Emotions are sending signals all the time, but these emotional clues are *not* infallible guides to right action! The heart needs the mind and the will to work together to guide your soul, and they must together be guided by something higher than any one of them.

Our task as human beings with hearts, minds, and wills is to disciple our hearts, minds, and wills in line with the way God made the world and according to the Word that God gave us. When your emotions are not in conversation with the mind and the will, your emotions are *out of*

*control*. Your soul is in turmoil, disquieted within you. But when your thinking and feeling and doing are integrated, you have peace and quiet in your soul.

And since this process of questioning and discipleship takes time, we need a way to speed that process up, because many things in life (although fewer than we think) need a quick response. You may not have time to have a lengthy discussion with yourself before you need to act. And this is why it is important to cultivate Christian character by developing Christlike *habits*.

Habits are practiced tendencies, well-worn paths for the soul to take. It's the soul's counterpart to memorizing Bible verses for quick reference. Individual decisions and actions accumulate into patterns, which harden into habits, which form your character. When those habits are well-formed, that's when people start describing you as "joyful", "peaceful", "patient", "just", and so on. You don't become "emotionless"; you become *properly emotional*. The discipline of questioning the heart according to God's standards is habit-forming, and it yields a harvest of godly character.

Point III: **Jesus is Lord of your emotions. Live like it!** This is a critical point. Up until now, much of what I've been saying might just as well have come from a psychologist as a pastor. But what you need to know is that unless Jesus Christ is your Lord, then you will be at the mercy of either your thoughts or your feelings or your will and desires.

You need the gospel in order for your soul to be quieted, in order for your inner turmoil to be calmed. Your thoughts cannot save you, your feelings cannot save you, your desires cannot save you. They all need to be saved through faith in Jesus. This is what Reformed people are getting at with the phrase "total depravity", or utter sinfulness. Not that you are as wicked as you can possibly be, but that no part of you is untouched by sin. A muddy hand can't clean a dirty face. You need a sinless Savior, someone who full of inner turmoil, in order to deliver you.

Jesus is the first person who ever "had it all together", a perfect unity of heart, mind, and will. And the way Jesus delivers you is by taking your weaknesses and sins and failures onto Himself, crucifying all of it in His own body, and rising again into newness of life. By His Spirit, when we stop trying to fix ourselves and turn to Him to save us, He unites us to Himself so that we can share in His new life, guided by His Word, and empowered by His Spirit.

So when you entrust yourself to Jesus as Lord, you're putting Him in charge of your emotions. This is not you being gracious to Jesus; this is Jesus setting you free from a tyrannical slavemaster. But Jesus doesn't just take the controls of your heart and operate you like a puppet; He does something far better. When Jesus saves you, He restores control of your emotions to *you*. The fruit of the Spirit is *self-control*.

This doesn't mean that your self is the standard; no, that's what Jesus saves you *from*. It means that you are called and enabled to calibrate your self, your inner life, according to Jesus. The Great Commission extends all the way to your feelings; because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, you are to go and make disciples of your emotions.

That's good news and a great commission: Jesus saves you and sets you free, and Jesus gives you the gift and calling of self-control. And I want you to think *not just* about what this means for *your* life, but how you can share this good news with your stressed out, emotionally enslaved neighbors. If you've been given this gift of a quiet soul, then whenever you hear talk about being busy or stressed, or losing your cool as a parent, or getting angry when things go wrong at work, then this presents you with a gospel opportunity in ordinary conversation to make much of Jesus and the way He has brought peace to your soul. Your neighbors might not be ready to recognize their sinfulness, but everyone knows what the Psalmist is saying about having a soul in turmoil, and everyone wants their soul to be at peace.

But there's more: maybe you believe what I'm saying about how it ought to work, and how Jesus makes it possible, and you *do* believe in Jesus, but you just aren't *experiencing* that peace and emotional stability in your own life. And so here's even more good news: Jesus not only saves you *from* your emotions and puts you *back in charge* of your emotions, He also *shows you how* to disciple your emotions.

Let's go with Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane. As a man, Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions. He knows joy, sadness, anger, love, pity, surprise, and so on. And in the garden, contemplating His suffering and death, Jesus was *sorrowful* and *troubled*. But rather than being ruled by those emotions, He took them to God for a soul conversation. As part of that conversation, He used His mind to think along with God whether or not there was any other way.

When it became clear that there was no other way, He submitted His will to God, embracing sorrow as the correct emotion for this situation.

In doing this, Jesus following God's path *through* this emotion, rather than letting emotion turn Him from the path, or denying that the path was actually sorrowful. He was right to feel troubled, but He didn't allow His emotions to override His mind or His will. Jesus didn't get rid of His emotions; He took them to God and disciplined them in submission to God's will.

For you, following Jesus means acknowledging His Lordship over your emotions. It means *reasoning* with your emotions and telling them to take up their cross and follow Jesus, not by mere willpower, but with a will strengthened by the Spirit through the means of grace. Discipling your emotions is part of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. It includes the constant practice of questioning the heart and submitting your whole self to the Word of God. Every day, every moment, ask yourself the question that God asked Jonah: "Do you do well to be angry? Do you do well to be joyful? Should you be afraid? Is it right for you to be sad?"

A quiet soul feels all of these emotions, but it is still quiet because it is not ruled by them; a quiet soul is one that trusts Jesus to shepherd you through whatever circumstances and whatever emotions the circumstances provoke. You must not be governed by your emotions, and you must not suppress or ignore your emotions, as if having feelings was the problem. God gave you feelings and emotions; they are good gifts, useful servants for your soul. But because sin has infected your emotions, Jesus needs to save your emotions, *and He does*.

By faith, you must put Jesus in charge of your feelings, using God's other gifts of mind and will, and cultivate the Spirit's fruit of self-control. This is the way of maturity and wholeness. This is the way to have an undivided heart and a quiet soul that hopes in God, no matter what you feel.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*