

## The Counseling Zone: A Journey into a Precious Word (Part 2) (Case study used by permission)

by Pastor Blake Shaw

I love Psalm 86:5. The verse says, “For you, LORD, are good, and ready to forgive....” Stop and let your mind soak in those words for a while. The LORD (Yahweh) is ready to forgive! Don’t blow by this too quickly. Don’t do the typical evangelical, “Oh, that’s nice” thought, and carry on. We’re talking about an infinitely holy God. Yes, a holy God: A God who is separate and distinct from sin and all creatures. Yet, He is ready to forgive. It’s almost as if He is sitting on the edge of His throne, waiting with arms open for us sinful, fallen humans to ask Him for forgiveness. He is ready to forgive. That is the heartbeat of God. Ready! To! Forgive!

For many years I have wrestled with the issue of forgiveness. Not that I am opposed to it; certainly, forgiveness is an absolutely precious reality of the Christian life. We, as sinful humans, know we need forgiveness. To us, as believers, there are fewer things we cherish more than the reality that our holy God has granted us forgiveness for our stubbornness, our rebellion, and our outright sin. Forgiveness granted, all based upon the work of Christ on the cross. We bask in His forgiveness. We treasure it. Enjoying God’s forgiveness is one thing. How it relates to everyday life is another. Every person alive has a theology of forgiveness, even if they don’t realize it. You and I, as believers have a theology of forgiveness. Even the conscienceless sociopath, the atheist, the hard-working businessman, and a mother of kids has a theology of forgiveness. It is unavoidable. Yet, having a theology of forgiveness is different than living out a theology of forgiveness.

### Brothers in Conflict

Cal and Shaun work in the same company and Cal is Shaun’s supervisor. Both of these men are professing believers and are faithfully involved in the life of the same local church. In recent months their relationship has eroded due to Shaun frequently disagreeing with Cal’s leadership style and some of the decisions he has made. As an outside observer, we would probably agree with Shaun about some of those decisions. To be fair to Cal, his decisions and leadership style are not issues of sin and he has never asked Shaun to do something that is sinful. The differences are matters of opinion and preference. Cal has a different philosophy about how things ought to be done and the owner of the company has entrusted Cal with these leadership responsibilities.

The disagreement eventually evolved into a head-to-head clash between these two brothers in Christ. The clash ended with Shaun punching a wall, kicking a garbage can, spewing forth a barrage of accusations and choice words, and walking out the door. That day, Shaun quit his job. Yet, the situation was far from over. Now, Cal and Shaun, at the request of their wives, have come to receive counseling. Reconciliation is needed. Forgiveness needs to be sought and forgiveness needs to be granted. What happens in the counseling room will be an expression of both Cal and Shaun’s theology of forgiveness. Both individuals have been wrong in this situation. Both need to seek forgiveness from the other. Both need forgiveness from the other.

Early in the meeting, Cal admits to Shaun that he lacked grace in how he communicated to Shaun and how he failed to lovingly listen to Shaun’s suggestions, concerns, and frustrations. In the session, Cal asked Shaun to forgive him for his harshness, his lack of kindness, for not being respectful to Shaun, and he promised Shaun to work on those areas in the days ahead.

At this juncture, we can be greatly encouraged. Cal has demonstrated humility. He has taken responsibility for his wrong-doing. This has been an honest step in pursuit of reconciliation. Sadly the situation is not resolved at this point. Reconciliation is not a reality. You see, Shaun has not granted forgiveness. The transaction has not been finalized. Nor, has Shaun sought forgiveness from Cal. Anger still rules Shaun’s heart. Much like yeast that leavens the whole lump—bitterness courses through Shaun’s veins. What could be a beautiful, God glorifying moment is held captive instead by one person’s anger and bitterness.

So where does one go in this situation when trying to help these two men? Cal has dealt with the logs in his eyes. He has done his part to be at peace with all men (Romans 12:18), in this case, Shaun. The ball is now in Shaun’s proverbial court. There are numerous responses Shaun could have at this juncture: 1) He could call into question the genuineness of Cal’s confession and his seeking of forgiveness (this happens all too often); 2) He could utter the words, “I’ll forgive you but I’ll never forget” (thus demonstrating a lack of understanding of what forgiveness is); 3) He could say, “I want to forgive but I need some time to get there” (This is a step in the right direction, but it could be a stall-tactic); 4) He could try to make Cal feel worse, saying things to magnify Cal’s failings. (This would be a form of manipulation); or 5) Shaun could imitate God and grant forgiveness. He could promise Cal that he will not dwell on the incident and that he will not bring up the incident again, nor use it against Cal. He could promise Cal that he will not talk to others about the incident and he will not allow the incident to stand between the two of them or let it hinder their personal relationship with each other.

To get to this fifth response, Shaun will first need to take a long look into the spiritual mirror of his own heart. At this point Shaun’s anger has blinded him, which is what sin always does. He can’t see clearly. Shaun’s fundamental problem is actually not with Cal. His fundamental problem is really with God. To truly help Shaun we have to help him understand God. When we scan the pages of Scripture we are gripped by the fact that anytime a person refuses to forgive, or when he manipulates, or makes a judgment upon the heart of another, or stalls in granting forgiveness from the person who asks, he actually demonstrates that he doesn’t understand God, nor does he understand himself. You see, Psalm 86:5 (and other Scriptures) make it clear that God is desirous to forgive. He’s eager to forgive. He loves reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). His very character oozes forgiveness to those who seek it (1 John 1:9; Matthew 18:21-25; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Shaun is a contrast to the God he says he knows and loves. Shaun, though very knowledgeable about God’s Word, falls far short of understanding the true character of God. Shaun has a breakdown in truly knowing God. He’d tell you that he knows God, but his actions convey otherwise. If he had true, intimate knowledge of God, he’d be quick to utter the words, “Cal, yes, I forgive you. Please forgive me....” But Shaun has a doctrinal problem. If he really understood God and himself, he too would be like God, eager and ready to forgive.

This challenges us to ponder our own lives. We know we are sinful. We know we sin against one another. We know that conflict and hurt is unavoidable, as long as we are around other people. The driving question for us should be: “Will we be imitators of God: eager and ready to forgive?”

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## Food for Thought BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

We are in the midst of a series of articles where we are considering the topic of substitute saviors. Last edition we considered the fact that Christ came to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21). This salvation is not just from the penalty of sin, but is also from the power, the practice, and the presence of sin. We desperately need a savior. We humans actually want a savior but, sadly, we want a savior on our own terms. We know something is not right in this world. We not only see the brokenness of the world at large, but we know that within ourselves, something is amiss. We try to silence the emptiness. We strive to fill our lives with something...someone...who can remove the stain of emptiness, of loneliness, of a lack of meaning or fulfillment. All too often we turn to saviors who are anything but. The Scriptures are replete with examples of people who turned frequently to something or someone, other than God, hoping for salvation. This, in essence, is idolatry.

### Substitute Saviors

You don’t have to read too far to find humans turning away from the living God to a substitute. Cain developed his own approach to worship. The world populace after the flood desired to make a name for themselves at the Tower of Babel. Abraham was found at times to turn away from God to protect his own skin or in a moment of faithlessness, turning to his wife’s handmaiden, thinking that she would be the one who would help pull off God’s promise. Over and over, throughout the pages of holy writ, we see people, God’s people, turn from their all-sufficient, gracious, and loving God, to broken cisterns of substitute saviors. We Christians of the 21st century really are no different. We find ourselves frequently turning to anything but the true God, looking for the protection, the provision, and the pleasure that can ultimately be found only in Jesus. We are easily fooled as we turn to substitute saviors. If you evaluate your life long enough, I’m fairly confident you’ll find it to be true. I know that for me, my life has been marked by sickening adventures of pursuing a substitute savior. So, let me illustrate from my own life. Perhaps you can relate.

Many years before the earth’s crust hardened, I habitually lived for a substitute savior. It’s not that this reality is odd, for there is nothing new under the sun and I am really just like every other human. You’ll have to take this by faith, but I use to play basketball. Yes, it’s true. There are pictures, stories, and really bad statistics to prove it to be so. I wasn’t a superstar. I was never chosen to All-conference or All-state teams. I was just your average, run-of-the-mill athlete. I had good games and I had bad games. I worked hard and was faithful to practice in season and out of season. The Lord was so good in allowing me to participate in nine years of competitive basketball: 4 years of grade school/junior high, 4 years of high school, and one year in college. Over the span of those nine years there were many moments of successes, losses, joys, sadness, victories, and defeats. Great memories aside, there was,

however, a fundamental problem: I lived for basketball. I thought about basketball. I dreamed about basketball. I day-dreamed about basketball. My grades in math, science, and other courses suffered, partially because I only cared about basketball (and girls).

You see, in my youth, I believed that basketball could somehow be my savior from the profound emptiness within. The truth be told, I craved after accolades and an elusive respect and adoration from those in the school and beyond. I confess that one great desire I had was to finally be fully convinced that my father was proud of me. I suppose that is the dream of many kids—to hear their dad (and mom) utter the words: “I’m so proud of you.” But, none of those desires were ever met. No accolades. No adoration. No respect. No, “I’m so proud of you.”

### The Gauntlet Tossed

I remember during my first year of college in Chicago, having a conversation with my father while I was home for Christmas break. I exclaimed, “Dad, I’m trying out for the basketball team this next year.” His response both stung and created (actually exposed) within me a drive that was soaked in pride. My dad, not wanting to burst my proverbial bubble, hesitantly answered, “Blake, you are too short for college basketball.” Ah, the gauntlet had been tossed. His statement stirred up within me a “Just you wait and see” attitude.

The next fall when tryouts began for the team, I realized that I had a lot of work to do. There was a host of returning players with about five or six additional slots to be filled. I worked hard and was chosen to be on the team. After the practice where we were chosen, I sprinted back to my dorm to make the infamous phone call back to Montana. To my chagrin, my father wasn’t even home. So I told my mom, “Let dad know that I made the basketball team.” What should have been a conversation of amazing joy was actually shot through with an arrogant spiteful “I told you so” attitude. My mom was very happy for me but when I hung up the phone there lingered in my heart a stinging emptiness. And, there should have been. Basketball, or more so, respect had become my functional savior. I craved for that illusive god. I knew my father had respect for and adoration for the athletes of yesteryear who had excelled in their given sport. I’d heard the stories and the comments about those heroes of days gone by. I saw my father’s glowing sense of joy when my older brother succeeded in sports. Yet, instead of being happy for my dad (and my brother), I began to worship—not the Giver of life and athletic abilities—but the empty, blinding, binding god called respect and adoration. This god failed me miserably, as will all false gods. Sadly, people had become my functional saviors but they couldn’t deliver.

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## Food for Thought [Continued from cover page]

### The Search for a Savior

What about you? Husband, do you subtly look to your wife to be your savior in some way? Wife, have you found yourself frustrated with your husband because he hasn't delivered to you the relationship you longed for, hoped for, or maybe were even promised. Single person, have you fallen prey to the mindset that finding someone to marry will provide the ultimate satisfaction for you? Teenager, are you looking for friends to provide something that will save you from boredom or will give you that craved-after acceptance? Businessman/woman, have you found within yourself a propensity to look to co-workers or success on the corporate ladder, hoping that others will save you from that stubborn, aching emptiness within? Perhaps you have turned to the church, thinking that it will be your savior. Yet, all you have found is disappointment, utter disappointment, because the church was never designed to be your savior.

We humans are perpetually turning to others, hoping to find a savior. It is no wonder we stagger about with disappointment, anger, bitterness, anxiety, stress, and conflict. We look to people and to objects, thinking they can save us when only One can truly do so. Jeremiah speaks of God's people who turned to broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). My friends, when I lived for the approval and the respect of my father, I was turning to a broken cistern. How about you? What broken cisterns are you turning to on a daily, hourly basis? You see, anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus Himself is a broken cistern. Isn't it sad that while our true Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ offers us living water that will quench our thirst (John 4:13-14), we continue to go back to the broken cisterns that cannot hold water? As we consider the Savior who came to save His people from their sins, let's be alert to our tendency to turn to false messiahs, hoping — just hoping that they can save us from ourselves — because they can't.

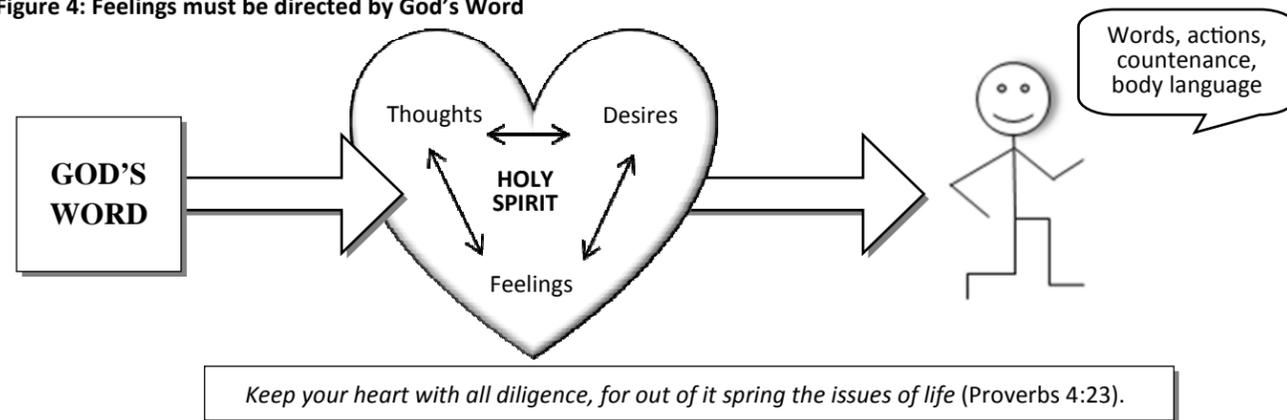
## Q&A with Guest Writer: Julie Gossack

**Sometimes conservative Evangelicals avoid the topic of feelings and emotions and even go so far as to portray them as a bad thing. Could you address the issue of feelings and what role they play in our lives?**

This is Part 5 of a 6-part series to answer this question. So far we have defined feelings and discussed the first and second of these biblical principles: 1) feelings are a component of the heart from which we live, 2) feelings are not inherently wrong, 3) feelings can be sanctified, and 4) feelings must be directed by God's Word. In this edition of The COG we will consider Principle 3.

**Principle 4: Feelings must be directed by God's Word.** Not only *can* feelings be sanctified, but they *must* be sanctified. Feelings, just like thoughts and desires, *must* be set apart to God and made holy. Therefore, feelings need to be directed by God's Word, working in tandem with the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6:17; Col. 3:16). Figure 4 illustrates this concept.

Figure 4: Feelings must be directed by God's Word



The Word of God and the Holy Spirit are powerful and sufficient to conform our emotional lives to Christlikeness. We don't need to suppress or ignore our feelings in order to obey the Lord because feelings are not outside the powerful influence of the Word and the Spirit. As we have already seen, feelings, as a component of the heart, can be sanctified. We can therefore be assured that the power of God is sufficient to do just that.

### God wants us to have righteous feelings

In his excellent book about feelings, Brian Borgman notes that "in order for our emotions to be sanctified and honoring to God, they must properly respond to truth."

Borgman says that a proper response to truth must consist of "right thinking, biblical volition, and faithful feelings." Sanctification means bringing *all* the components of the heart into subjection to God's Word. Undoubtedly God wants us to *think* a certain way, He wants us to have certain *desires*, and He also wants us to *feel* a certain way. God wants our whole heart to be submitted to Him; therefore if we suppress or ignore our feelings, we resist that sanctification process.

1 Borgman, Brian, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating godly emotions in the Christian life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009) 83.

2 Ibid. 89.

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## Q&A Continued from facing page

Borgman comments on the essential ministry of the Word to cultivate godly emotions:

The Word is the foundation upon which we build our emotional sanctification. "The way that we know what he wants us to desire and feel is by reading the Scriptures and noting what his saints are represented as properly desiring and feeling as well as what God commands and counsels his saints to desire and feel." The Word through the Spirit helps us not to suppress our emotions but to cultivate and communicate them with Spirit-empowered self-discipline.<sup>3</sup>

Cultivating *godly* emotions through the enabling power of God should be our diligent focus rather than suppressing or ignoring our emotions.

We should not be surprised, then, that the Word of God contains a plethora of directives concerning our emotions. We are told to feel joy (Philippians 4:4; I Peter 4:13), grief (Romans 12:15), sorrow over sin (II Corinthians 7:10; James 4:9), compassion (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12), peace (Colossians 3:15), and hate (Romans 12:9). These are but a few of the emotions that God commands. Additionally, God tells us those feelings that we are *not* to have, for example: fear (Matthew 10:29-31; Hebrews 13:5-6), anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:6), envy (Romans 13:13; I Peter 2:1) and sinful anger (Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8).<sup>4</sup>

In order to cultivate these godly emotions, we must be diligent heart-keepers that continually tend our hearts with the God's Word.<sup>5</sup> Wise King Solomon instructed the reader: *Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life* (Proverbs 4:23). As we tend our hearts and ask God to search our hearts (Psalm 139:23-24), we will begin to identify emotions that are not in line with God's Word. We should *not* ignore or suppress these feelings; those feelings are an indication that something in our heart is awry. (Our thoughts and desires, too, are not right.) Rather we should acknowledge our sinful feelings (as well as sinful thoughts and sinful desires) to God, confessing them (Psalm 51:3; I John 1:9) and then yielding to the Spirit's sanctifying power to produce righteous fruit (Romans 8:13-14; II Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:22-23; II Thessalonians 2:13).<sup>6</sup>

Borgman makes this same point:

If God commands us to do something and we don't do it, what is our normal course of action? Confession and repentance. Why should the protocol be any different when we fail to feel the way God commands us to feel?<sup>6</sup>

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN BIBLICAL COUNSELING

**4th Annual Biblical Counseling Conference  
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You can register online at our church website or find a registration form that is available throughout the church.

We should resolve to diligently examine and tend our hearts with God's Word in order to cultivate obedient thoughts, desires, and feelings. Then our obedient behavior will follow. If we just "do the right thing" without first tending our hearts through the Word and the Spirit that doesn't really get after true heart obedience and it can be hypocritical.<sup>7</sup> We must remind ourselves that "Sanctification is not accomplished by mere behavioral change."<sup>8</sup> God is concerned with heart obedience rather than a stoic approach to obedience that says "just do it."<sup>9</sup>

Jonathan Edwards was a great example of one who diligently tended his heart. Edwards once wrote:

Resolved, whenever my feelings begin to appear in the least out of order, when I am conscious of the least uneasiness within, or the least irregularity without, I will then subject myself to the strictest examination.<sup>10</sup>

Edwards' example is one we can follow. Let us not ignore or suppress our emotions, but let us be diligent heart-keepers who tend our hearts *with the Word* in order to cultivate godly emotions with which we can worship Jesus.

God has commanded that our feelings be holy, and He has graciously provided the power that enables us to have such feelings. As His children, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are given a new heart that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Our heart of stone has been turned to a heart of flesh with the capacity for holy emotions and affections. This is a marvelous mystery and in the words of John Piper, "Christian conversion. . . is a supernatural, radical thing. The heart is changed. And the evidence of it is not just new decisions, but new affections, new feelings."<sup>11</sup> Praise be to God!

3 Borgman, Brian, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating godly emotions in the Christian life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009) 83.

4 I propose that we think of joy and anger and compassion, etc., not only as emotions, but also as thoughts and desires. That is, joy has its thoughtful contemplations but it is also a desire, or direction of the will. Joy is a thought, it is a desire, and it is an emotion. It is the same with anger: Anger is an emotion, but we also have angry thoughts and angry desires.

5 Psalm 119:9-11; John 17:17; II Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12

6 Borgman, Brian, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating godly emotions in the Christian life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009) 79-80.

7 I am not suggesting disobedience to God's Word. Rather, I am suggesting diligence to tend the heart with God's Word so that obedience is a fruit produced by God's grace (John 15:4-8). Outward behavior without inward obedience is pharisaical (Matthew 15:7-9, 23:1-39). In contrast, Spirit-empowered, Word-driven obedience is honoring to God.

8 Thomas, Rick, "Mind Mapping: How to change from the inside out" <<http://rickthomas.net/mind-mapping-how-to-change-from-the-inside-out/>> 18 Jul 2014.

9 Abraham offering Isaac (Genesis 22) and Jesus in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46) are sometimes cited as examples of those who obeyed even though they didn't feel like it. No doubt they wrestled in their thoughts, desires, and emotions, but that doesn't mean their final acts of obedience were without obedient emotions. I believe that Abraham obeyed in full faith (Hebrews 11:17-19) and that Jesus' submission to the cross was no less than whole-hearted obedience.

10 Dodds, Elisabeth D., *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The uncommon union of Jonathan & Sarah Edwards*, (Laurel, MS: Audubon Press, 2004), 241.

11 Piper, John, "Fact! Faith! Feeling!" Testing a common slogan" <<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/fact-faith-feeling>> 26 Jun 2013.