

# Managing Your Emotions

by Erwin Lutzer

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*Erwin Lutzer emphasizes the importance of managing emotions in the Christian life by balancing emotional awareness with spiritual truth and community support.*

**Duration:** 36:52

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Matthew 26:39, Romans 8:1, Romans 8:32, Ephesians 1:3, Philippians 4:8, Hebrews 12:2

**Topics:** "Emotions"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of recognizing and managing our emotions in order to align ourselves with the will of God. He uses the analogy of a pilot who ignores the instrument panel and crashes as a reminder to not let our feelings dictate our actions. The preacher then turns to the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane as an example of how Christ coped with his emotions. Jesus prayed to God, expressing his desire for the cup to pass from him, but ultimately surrendered to God's will. The sermon concludes with the reminder that while it is important to acknowledge and share our emotions, there are times when we must choose obedience to God's will over our feelings.

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## Transcript

The delight to come to a conference like this and to look over the audience and see some people whom you recognize from your own church. We have some folks here this morning from Moody Church, and I am going to ask you Moodyites to stand, please. Would you do that? All of you from Moody Church.

All right. This is from Moody Church in Chicago, and we're really glad that you're all here. If I give you a prayer request, before I give it to you, how many promise that you'll pray for the request that I'm going to give you? Let's see.

Sixteen. Ha ha ha, there's more than sixteen. All right, now you've made the promise, now you've got to keep it.

During the month of October, this coming year, just really next month, it's almost September, I'm going to be, we at Moody Church, I should say, are going to be having a revival emphasis in the ministry of Moody Church. My messages during the month of October will be geared to revival, and so I would really appreciate, and I know the members of the church would appreciate, your real intercessory prayer for that month, that God might do something great among us and that we might have a better understanding of the potential and all the things that God is able to do in our lives. So pray for us there at Moody Church.

We have many needs, many opportunities, and I trust that you'll remember us in prayer, especially though for that series in the month of October. Today I'm going to speak on the topic of managing your emotions, managing your emotions. I'm going to do that because oftentimes those of us who are in revival know that you're not supposed to live by your emotions.

And during the past years here at Moody--this isn't Moody Church, is it?--during the past years here at Rives Baptist, we've been having a number of messages on emotions which stress the need for people to be free from their emotions so that they do not live in accordance with them. Because if so, you're on a spiritual roller coaster. But you know, as I have been thinking back, it has dawned on me that I think that we sometimes forget that we are indeed emotional creatures.

And sometimes in some of the messages, the implication has been given that somehow if we could just come to a point in our life where we wouldn't have any feeling, we'd really be much better off. Sometimes, you know, when we lead someone to Christ, we tell them that you should have faith in facts and then feeling. And that's basically true.

But the problem is that the impression is sometimes given that our emotions are just so much baggage that it would be better if we didn't have. And I don't think that the Bible presents this. I think that we must keep in balance the fact that we are creatures of emotion, and we must listen to our emotions.

The reason that I'm burdened about this is because I've heard in two or three instances of people who have been deeply affected by revival, who in their marriage, when their wife complains of depression, the husband simply says, well, you know, you're not supposed to live by your emotions, just reject those emotions and that's it. And oftentimes we become insensitive to those who are going through emotional trauma because we've given the impression that the real victorious Christian life is the stoical Christian life that is totally undaunted, and we almost, though we haven't said so, give the impression that you go along in life without any feelings at all. And if you could do that, you'd be very spiritual.

But you remember the Apostle Paul criticized the pagans because, he said, they were past feeling. One of the problems in our society is that we have people who do not feel deeply, they do not feel the emotion of sympathy, for example. And so we must see this in balance.

In order to do this, I'd like you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 26. Matthew chapter 26, because we have the story here of how Jesus Christ coped with his emotions, how Christ managed his emotions in the Garden of Gethsemane. Incidentally, if you're wondering if I have a cold, the answer is no.

I picked up an allergy somewhere along the line, and it doesn't make me feel as good as I'd like to, but nonetheless, we'll keep preaching on feelings. Now, Jesus Christ as man experienced the whole gamut of human emotions, except personal guilt and bitterness. He experienced joy, he experienced loneliness, he experienced disappointment, he experienced sorrow.

And so Jesus Christ, being the perfect man, experienced all of the emotions that we experience. And one of the emotions that he experienced was the deep, hurtful motion of depression that is found here in Matthew chapter 26 in Gethsemane. Now I want you to realize that Jesus, in experiencing this emotion, it was unrelated to sin.

That is to say, personally, Jesus Christ had not sinned. But Jesus Christ was anticipating becoming identified with the sins of the world, and there, as he was in anticipation of the cross, he was overwrought

and almost distraught by emotional hurt and grief. And I want us to notice some principles of how Jesus Christ handled those emotions.

First of all, obviously--and this isn't one of my principles--but it's obvious that if Jesus, the sinless Son of God, did not live his life without emotional turbulence, who are we to think that we should be able to? You know, Jesus Christ, having gone through such an experience, is a reminder to us that when God created us, he created us with rich emotions. And every normal human being is going to experience a wide range of emotions in his or her Christian life. And here is Jesus Christ experiencing this trauma.

How did he handle it? Number one, number one, he requested the support of friends. He requested the support of friends. In Matthew chapter 26, verse 36, it says, Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane.

The word means winepress. And he said to his disciples, sit here while I go over there and pray. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and distressed.

And he said to them, my soul is deeply grieved to the point of death. Remain here and keep watch with me. I don't think Jesus was saying to those three disciples, simply pray with me, though he meant that.

But Jesus was saying, I am under the tremendous, incredible burden and emotional anticipation of the cross. And so in light of that, Jesus is saying, I need the support of those who are my friends to help me during these crucial moments and during these crucial hours. Now, could I just say to you that that is true of you if you're going through emotional distress? The answer is not simply to say, well, I'm not going to listen to my emotions or I'm going to repress my emotions.

One of the greatest things that you can do to help you during those emotional times of trauma is to gather other believers about you and say, I want to share my emotional load with you. In the Chicago area, there was a family who had a little boy whom they adopted since birth. And because of the fact that the papers that were signed, there was some problem.

You know, sometimes there are problems with adoption. His real mother, who obviously was not fit to take care of that little boy, kidnapped him. And at the age of four, he was kidnapped and he was taken with her and he was subject to child abuse.

And the parents knew it and there was no way for them to be able to get this boy. And it got all hung up in the courts. And I remember speaking to this family and I said, now, do you have people who are praying with you? And they said, oh, the people in the church are assuring us that they are praying for us.

And I said, but do you have people in that church who are praying with you, who are getting on their knees together with you? And they said, no, we haven't done that. And so I suggested that to them because here was a couple who was absolutely torn to emotional shreds as any normal, feeling, thinking, committed Christian would be in a case like that. And what you need at a time like that is to have people gather around you and you say, I want to share with you my burden and you must bear that emotional stress with me.

That's what Jesus did in Gethsemane. You know, about eight or nine years ago when the revival was in the Detroit area, there was a woman whose story I think is recorded in the flames of freedom, but she was so depressed that she already had the sleeping pills in her purse because she was going to commit suicide. She got everything straightened out.

She cleaned her house. You know, if you're going to go, at least leave a clean house. And the pills were in the purse.

And as she went into the church, as she drove to church, that was the last thing she was going to do is stop at church and then take the pills. But many of you know how that that woman was sitting there and as they were singing, oh, say, but I'm glad she was, as I mentioned last night, among those who were saying, oh, say, but I'm mad. But she was taken into the prayer room and six or seven women gathered around her and said, we refuse to leave this prayer room until God has met your need.

I wrote a letter to her about three or four years later and she said, even though I have many physical problems, the emotional thoughts of suicide have never returned. You see, it's not just enough for us to say, I reject those emotions, though we must. But there are people that God has given to us with whom we must share those hurts and emotions and who must intercede on our behalf to bring together the body of Jesus Christ and to strengthen one another's hands in the Lord.

And that's what Jesus did. He requested the support of friends. Second, I want you to notice he admitted his feelings.

He admitted his feelings. This is remarkable because he is the son of God. He is the one who is spotless and he has the humility to admit to his disciples precisely how he feels.

He didn't think that it was beyond him somehow to admit how he felt. You'll notice it says, verse 38, my soul is deeply grieved to the point of death. He was not ashamed of his feelings.

How many Christians there are who have feelings just like that, but who hide them, who say, well, if I'm spiritual, I'll never be grieved to the point of death. If I'm really walking in the spirit, I will never have the eruption and the convulsion of emotions. But Jesus did and Jesus admitted those emotions to his pupils as the spotless son of God.

He was not ashamed of those emotions and he allowed them to have a glimpse of his unutterable woe that he was going through. You know that one of the things, one of the first things we must do to overcome certain hurtful emotions is to admit that we have them, whether they're good or bad. Not merely suppression, but be willing to admit to those emotions.

I know of a church where there was a deacon who was extremely angry and he was pounding his fist on the table during the meeting and someone said, oh, you shouldn't become so angry. And he said, I'm not angry. As he continued to pound the table.

That man will never overcome his anger until he admits that he has problems with the emotion of anger. You see, until we are willing to admit the emotions that we have, we aren't really in a position where we can deal with those emotions. Now, what was it that caused this incredible grief that Jesus Christ experienced? Was it because of anticipation of death? No, it wasn't the anticipation of death because many people had died.

Many people had been nailed to a cross. During the reign of Henry II, there was a man who went to the gallows very gallantly and he did this to shame Jesus Christ. He said, where is Jesus? And Gethsemane was going through all that trauma, anticipating death.

He said, I am going to die and I'm going to show that I have more courage than Jesus Christ had. Now that misses the point completely. It wasn't because of death.

What it was, was that Jesus recognized that he would soon be identified legally with the sins of the world. The spotless son of God would become legally guilty, not personally guilty, but legally guilty of every sin that has ever been committed. He would become legally guilty of adultery, of genocide, of rape, of lust, of all of the sins of the world that would be placed upon him.

And as he, the spotless son of God, was anticipating contact with the sins of the world, his soul shrank. His soul shrank. His soul shrank.

In anticipation of the cross. That was the cut. You know, I don't think we can understand this fully because, uh, think of someone who is totally immune to something like sin.

We become so used to sin that it becomes a part of our lives. But Jesus was spotless. He was holy.

And think of that identification with sin, even though it was a legal identification. Imagine the trauma that Jesus Christ anticipated, but he was willing to admit his feelings. Third, Jesus realized that feelings do not separate us from God.

Our feelings do not separate us from God. I want you to notice in verse 42 it says, and he went away again a second time and prayed, saying, my father. He still called God his father.

In fact, Mark in giving the same story, in Mark's version, he says that Jesus said, Abba, father, which really means daddy. You see, what Jesus Christ realized was that even though his emotions were in such turmoil, that his relationship with his father was still secure. It was still there all the time.

And so even though Jesus knew that his father would be turning his back on him when he said, my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? Jesus was secure in being able to relate to his heavenly father. Now, you know, don't you, that your acceptance before God is completely unrelated to your feelings. You know, the Bible tells us that when you receive Jesus Christ as Savior, you are declared legally as perfect as Jesus Christ.

Legally as perfect as Jesus Christ. You are accepted in the beloved one. And that acceptance is secure and it is steadfast.

It is unrelated to feelings. It is even unrelated to your performance. Getting out of fellowship means that though we are out of fellowship, we are out of moral agreement as we learned last night.

Actually, our acceptance, our legal acceptance in the sight of God is still secure. And you know, that's one of the most important things that you have to remember during a time of emotional stress is the fact that your security rests in Jesus Christ. You know, it was Martin Luther who discovered that the word justification is a legal term and it means that we are declared righteous even though we sometimes, often I should say, are still imperfect.

Legally, we have been declared righteous. He was standing against the popular notion of his day which said that justification makes people righteous and because some people knew that they weren't being made very righteous, they had to go to purgatory to become righteous enough to enter into heaven. But Luther saw very clearly that justification declares us righteous.

Our acceptance before God is secure. And Jesus knew that in his emotional grief. Let's suppose that I were to go to Jackson and stand there at that airplane, the Blue Goose, better known to many simply as a puddle jumper, and you stand there and you say to yourself, I want to fly to Chicago, but you feel unworthy or you feel that you somehow can't because you have a headache, maybe you have an allergy that you picked up.

But you know, actually, the airline company doesn't care whether you have a headache or whether you have an allergy. All that they look for is the ticket. In the very same way, God says that what you need is Jesus Christ for your acceptance and that actually gives you the security to be able to handle those feelings when they come and those sins when they come.

It's the security of knowing that we are accepted in the beloved one. You know, Francis Schaeffer has a place up in the Alps and the Alps, you know, are some hills out in Europe somewhere. Not quite as beautiful as the British Columbia Rockies.

I'm sure more beautiful. But he has a place up there called Libri. And there was a girl from Edgewater Baptist Church who was hitchhiking through Europe one time and she ended up in Libri and she got back in fellowship with the Lord there at Libri.

And she said to Francis Schaeffer, if I leave this beautiful place in the Alps and go back to the harsh streets of Chicago, she said, I may get to those streets and I may discover that in that big, bad city of Chicago, I may learn that God isn't real after all. And Francis Schaeffer said to her, if you get back to Chicago and find out that God isn't real, then don't come back up here. Because if God isn't real in the harsh streets of Chicago, he isn't real up here either.

You see, it's easy for us to be overwhelmed by the beauty of nature and to say, oh, God feels so close. But Schaeffer's point is, whether it's the beautiful Alps or whether it's the harsh streets of a big city, God's presence is just as much with us because we know that his promises, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee, are always true regardless of where we are or regardless of the scenery or how we feel emotionally. And so God's presence is ever with you.

God's presence is not based on feelings. It is based on promises. Now Jesus recognized that and he realized that his feelings did not separate him from God.

The number four, I want you to realize that Jesus did have to reject his feelings to do the will of God. Jesus rejected his feelings to do the will of God. Now as I've been saying, it's important to look at our emotions, to listen to them, to share them, but ultimately when it comes down to the wire, there are times when you're just going to have to say that my emotions are running contrary to obedience and I will obey whether I feel like it or not.

Notice in verse 39 it says, and he went a little beyond them and fell on his face and prayed saying, my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as thou wilt. Did you notice the text? He says, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless, nevertheless, you know, sometimes you may say, oh, there's so much conflict in my soul.

I want you to realize that even Jesus Christ, the spotless, sinless son of God, that he in his humanity, his inclination was contrary to the will of the father, his human inclination. But when it came down to that, he was willing to bow to the sovereignty of God and say, not my will, nevertheless, thy will. I want you to

notice some progression in this prayer because it really shows us how Jesus Christ was yielding to the father in verse 39.

It says yet, not as I will, but as thou wilt, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me yet, not as I will, but as thou wilt. In verse 42, he prays again, my father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, he adds now thy will be done. You know, it's very interesting that the Bible says in the book of Hebrews that Jesus prayed to God, the father with strong crying and tears onto him that was able to save him from death and was heard in that he feared that's in Hebrews chapter seven.

That's where reference to Gethsemane. And do you know that in Greek, the word that is used there in Hebrews was heard means that he received a positive response. Jesus prayed that he might be saved from death and God heard him and said, yes, you say, well, that isn't quite right.

Jesus did die. But you know what I think the answer to that is, is the resurrection. God did answer Jesus Christ's prayer.

It's just the death had to intervene. Jesus prayed that he might be spared, that he might be alive, that he might not remain dead. God heard Jesus Christ drank the cup, but in the end, Jesus Christ was victorious.

And there are some prayers that God answers, but not exactly at the same time and in the same way that we anticipate. And so Jesus Christ there was noticing that his human inclinations were going contrary to the will of God. The Bible says in Hebrews chapter 15 that even Christ pleased not himself.

That's what the text says. Now, obviously, Jesus did what he wanted to do because he said that my need is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work. But there were times in the conflict, particularly as in Gethsemane, where Jesus Christ experiencing this found that his human desire and the will of God clashed.

And when that happened, he chose the will of God. There's a fifth observation I'd like you to notice, and this is really found in the book of Hebrews. Also in the twelfth chapter, it is this that right feelings, right feelings, feelings of joy, follow obedience, feelings of joy, follow obedience, follow obedience.

Notice it says, and this is Hebrews chapter twelve, verse two, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him, notice that the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. You'll notice that the Bible says that the reason that Jesus Christ could say yes when every emotional part of his being was crying no, the reason that Jesus Christ could say yes is because he knew that beyond the initial trauma, beyond that tremendous agony of the cross, there would be joy. And the Bible says that the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross and he despised the shame.

Now, one of our problems often is this, that we want the joy, and then we say, Lord, if you give me the joy, if you give me the right feelings, I'll obey. God says, if you obey, I will then begin to give you the right feelings. We have it reversed.

Because there are many people who say to themselves, you know, if I only feel like it, then I'll obey. But God says you obey, and then the feelings will begin to come. I think an illustration in the physical realm that is obvious is getting out of bed in the morning.

We heard something about that last night. We heard a person who indicated that he was having some struggle, and as a pastor, he was just a little too sack-religious, remember? When we choose to say, I will get up when that alarm goes off, and when we choose to do that, within five or ten minutes, we begin to feel pretty good. But if we decide to give in to our feelings and we think that we ought to feel really good, we really don't feel good because we are overwhelmed by guilt.

One of the most interesting observations I think I've ever made of human nature is this. That when a person does whatever they feel like doing, you'd think that they'd really be happy, right? I mean, isn't that the epitome of bliss? To be able to do precisely exactly what you feel like doing? But people who simply follow their emotions along, and they are led along like a cork along a river, and they do just whatever they feel like doing, actually end up being the most miserable people in the world. Think of the housewife who says, I'm just going to do whatever I feel like doing.

Did you know that one of the reasons that housewives have such a high percentage of depression is because they don't have to punch a time clock? They can do whatever they feel like at the time they feel like doing it. And so they say to themselves, perhaps one does, not any of you, I'm thinking of some perhaps in Chicago, who say to themselves, you know, I'm just going to do today, I just don't feel that great, I'm just going to do whatever I feel like doing. And so the ironing begins to stack up.

I once counseled a couple, you won't believe this, but there were, the husband said he once counted 11 wash rags in the washcloths in the bathroom, simply because his wife never felt like cleaning up the bathroom. And so she's doing precisely what she wants to do. She wants to sit in front of that TV, and she wants to sit there and she wants to munch chocolate.

That's her heart's desire. And so she does it. She feels great, right? Don't look so pious.

You know that she feels miserable. We are going to do that which is right. We must do it.

I remember when I was teaching at Moody Bible Institute, I had to get up real early in the morning and some mornings I didn't feel like teaching at all. There are times like that. But I got into the classroom and five minutes later I found out that life wasn't so bad after all and I was starting to get excited about it.

Once you decide that you are going to do it, then God begins to build those feelings and he begins to put some things together in our lives. But the obedience comes and the feelings then follow. Let me illustrate this in other ways.

You know in revival one of the things that we keep hammering on always time and time again is bitterness. Because there are so many people who are bitter towards God. They are bitter towards their parents.

And I know that Brother Godfrey emphasizes this a lot in his ministry. And one of the things that people sometimes say is, I don't want to forgive, I can't forgive because every fiber in my body militates against saying I forgive. But you see it is only when we say I choose to forgive, I make that choice and I insist upon it in Jesus name with God's help, it is then you see that God begins to put some things together in our life.

But the feelings don't come first, the obedience comes first and after that the feelings begin to be put together. Sometimes not overnight, sometimes over a period of time, but God begins to rebuild us. And you know there are some people who are so messed up emotionally that they almost have to start right

over again.

They have to begin from the beginning. They have to have a clean slate. They have to have all of the past forgiven.

They've got to take care of that before they can begin to build in the future. And so what God wants to teach us is the need for obedience. Sometimes I've referred to a time when I was depressed.

I'm not given to depression very easily, but it's a very interesting experience because you feel so filled with vanity. You just feel that everything is so futile. You've had that experience.

And I remember having to get on my knees and thank the Lord for twenty things that were true of me independently of my feelings in Jesus Christ. Because did you know God's given us all sorts of things that are ours in Jesus Christ? He that spared not his own son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? God loves to give. And I had to force myself to focus on those things before God began to put some of those things together.

I've sometimes given an illustration, a true illustration of an airplane that was flying along and the pilot who was very well acquainted with the area discovered that apparently the instrument panel went berserk because it showed a wrong direction. And so he congratulated himself on knowing better and so he flew where he knew he should be going. But he crashed.

And the reason is because the instrument panel did not go berserk. He had lost his sense of direction and didn't know it. And I want you to know today that what we must do in our lives is to constantly dig our roots down deeply into God's instrument panel.

Because God is able to give us a true reading of our position in Jesus Christ. God is able to help us to see ourselves as he sees us. God is able to keep us on course.

And if we begin to veer off and do whatever we feel like doing and become subject to our emotions, that is wrong. But God wants us to be obedient and then take our emotional life and make it rich and make it full, not to deny the emotions. Not to say, well, I don't have any or I'm repressing them.

No. When God created you, he created you as a rich, full person and showered you with an abundance of emotions. And God wants us to be able to deal with some of those negative ones and then get on with some of the positive ones, such as joy and freedom and release so that we'll be able to serve him successfully.

Remember that Jesus Christ promises us emotional stability, but that does not mean that we'll be always free from emotional trauma. But when we obey, it is his responsibility to help us put our emotional lives back together again. Let's pray together, shall we? Our father, we're so encouraged because when we think of Jesus, we know that he was perfect.

And it's encouraging for us to know that Jesus, though he was perfect, did go through this experience. And we think father of the many today who are bearing very heavy burdens and rightly so. They are concerned about their children.

They are concerned about various relatives who perhaps are living in unbelief and rebellion. Maybe there's sickness in the family that has caused great heaviness. We pray that you might help them to seek

out the support of friends, to be willing to admit their emotions as Jesus was.

And yet in the end to submit to whatever your will might be. Father, we pray that you might help us so that our emotions might not hold us back from obedience. And yet at the same time, we pray that we might not deny our emotions but allow you to develop them richly and fully.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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