

SERMON OUTLINE 2

“A HEART SET FREE IS”

PSALMS AND THE WAY TOWARDS EMOTIONAL MATURITY

“Just as Christ provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion.” – **Saint Athanasius**

“[The Psalms] are a medicine chest for the heart.” – **Tim Keller**

“[The Psalms] enable us to bring into our conversation with God feelings and thoughts most of us think we need to get rid of before God will be interested in hearing from us.” – **Ellen Davis**

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Our emotional lives are messy. They’re tangled, they jump out at us at odd times, and we find ourselves alternately governed by our emotions or petrified by them. Boys are taught to shut down their emotions, while girls are affirmed for their expression of emotion, yet tend to experience more embarrassment, guilt, shame, sadness and distress than boys.
- B. Young people in particular are experiencing an extraordinary amount of anxiety today. A recent survey by the National Health & Nutrition Survey showed that approximately 13% of children ages 8-15 had a diagnosable mental disorder, while 25% of teens suffered from an anxiety disorder. Left untreated, this kind of anxiety can lead to self-destructive activities.
- C. In a 2016 feature story for ESPN, Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time (28 swimming medals, 7X World Swimmer of the Year, a Twitter following of 2.1 million) speaks at length about his experience at a psychological trauma and addiction treatment center. It was there that he finally reckoned with the pain of his parents’ divorce.

Phelps' issues centered largely on his complicated relationships with two of the most influential men in his life—the one who had been there for him and the one who pretty much hadn't. Phelps' parents divorced when he was 9, and he'd long felt abandoned by his father, Fred. The pool was his escape, and [his coach Bob] Bowman was a surrogate father of sorts.

Eventually, Phelps realized that all the Olympic medals in the world couldn't ease his pain—and instead made life more complicated. By 2014, he was approaching 30, lost, with no identity beyond that of a champion swimmer. He self-medicated and wondered whether his was a life worth living. ‘I had no self-esteem,’ Phelps says. ‘No self-worth. I thought the world would just be better off without me. I figured that was the best thing to do—just end my life’.

Why would someone who had it all want to kill himself? Because his heart was deeply broken and needed to be healed.

- D. It is not when we shut our emotions down or when we let our emotions do whatever “they want” that our hearts are free. Our hearts are free only when we allow Christ to order our emotions by his Spirit. And God has given us the psalms to help us in this work of emotional maturity.
- E. How exactly do the psalms help us to have well-ordered hearts, open to God and to others? They give us permission to feel our emotions without being mastered by them. Here are three ways that the psalms help us to have a heart that is fully set free.

II. TEACHING

A. The grace of talking to God.

1. The psalms encourage us to tell God everything that is in our hearts. While it’s often difficult to actually do this in our moments of acute pain, this is in fact what the psalms encourage us repeatedly to do.
 - a. Psalm 5:1-3, “Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.”
 - b. Psalm 103: 1-2, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”
 - c. Psalm 130:1-2, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!”
2. In refusing the temptation to hide our hearts from God, we refuse the temptation to use words as a cover-up. We instead speak to God trustingly, openly, vulnerably. When we do this, we find ourselves praying freely to God in a way that *frees* us.
3. The early church fathers called it *en loco Dei* to describe life with God: “on location *with* God.”

B. The grace of saying it all to God.

1. The psalms don’t invite us to say only a *few* things or only the “proper” or “holy” things to God. The psalms invite us to say *all* things. This includes such things as:
 - Help! (Ps. 12)
 - I have sinned! (Ps. 51)
 - Forgive me! (Ps. 25)
 - Why? (Ps. 22)
 - How long? (Ps. 13)
 - I am alone! (Ps. 88)
 - Defend me! (Ps. 43)
 - Have mercy! (Ps. 57)
 - Remember me! (Ps. 105)
 - Be gracious to me! (Ps. 123)

- Lead me! (Ps. 31)
2. The psalms in this way give voice to the whole anatomy of the soul, as John Calvin describes it. He says, “there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” No emotion is excluded from such prayer. No topic is out of bounds.
 3. This should come as extraordinarily good news for many us who may worry that God is only be interested in hearing a few things from us, perhaps only the “right” things, not all the messy contents of our hearts.
 4. This is also good news for those of us who feel that we should always have our act together when we pray. The psalms reassure us that a willingness to talk to God is all that matters. With the psalms on our lips, we can be confident that all of our heart can be brought to God.

C. The grace of sharing our hearts with the community of God.

1. For the psalmist, the community is always close at hand. There is no hiding from the community—there is in fact no *need* to hide, even if the temptation to hide is always powerful. The community always gets to hear one’s heartfelt petitions and full-throated thanksgivings, because it is a community that is marked by the grace of God.
2. In the psalms, it is “my whole heart” with the community, not apart from it, not on the margins of it.
 - a. Psalm 22:22, 25, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him.”
 - b. Psalm 111:1, “Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.”
3. What the psalms encourage us to envision is a community that will be able and willing to call out our truest self and help us identify our “self-protective sinfulness *as it occurs*,” as the psychologist Larry Crabb puts it.

III. CONCLUSION

- A. The tragedy of trying to suppress our emotions is that we become mastered by them. We become not stewards of our emotions but rather slaves to them. We become controlled by our emotions instead of good shepherds of them.
- B. God in his mercy does not leave us bereft of help. He gives us the psalms to help us become emotionally whole. And he gives us permission to share our hearts fully with him and with others.
- C. The reason why we read the psalms over and over again is that they are more like physical therapy than they are like summer camp. Their best work is done over time rather than at a single moment. The only way that our hearts become healed is by bringing all of our heart’s cares to God, rather than keeping them away from God, and by trusting that God has given us a community to bear witness to our heart’s cares and to bear them with us, rather than hiding from people.

- D. And with Jesus as our model and the Spirit of God as our help, the reading and singing and praying of the psalms can bring us into a place of true emotional maturity. The psalms can bring us into something bigger than ourselves: the re-ordering of our hearts so that we can become agents to the world of the kind of emotional wholeness that marks Christ's own life.

IV. APPLICATION

- A. Do you ever feel that God can't handle the pain of your heart? Do you struggle to believe that you can be a mess in front of God? Consider reading the psalms from this sermon over the course of this week as a way to see how God truly and fully welcomes you to share your heart with him.
- B. What is one way that your heart feels most broken today? Find a time this week to talk out loud to God about this particular care of your heart and to trust that Jesus invites you to cast all your cares on him.
- C. What are you afraid will happen if you are fully honest with others about the pain in your heart? Ask God to show you one trusted person with whom you could share the pain in your heart this week.