

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

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[0 : 01] We are starting a series this morning that will take us through Lent to Easter, and the theme of our series is Emotionally Healthy Spirituality.

This is inspired in part by a book written with the same name by Peter Scazzaro, and the plan is to move together through this book week by week, chapter by chapter, until we get to Easter.

I plan to preach sermons that complement the content in the book. So, technically, you could just listen to the sermons without needing to read the book or vice versa. I think you're going to get a lot more out of it if you do both together.

That's how we've designed this, and so if you don't have a copy of the book, I encourage you to pick one up. But I want to answer the question this morning of why are we doing this? Why focus on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality?

A lot of people say, well, you know, in discipleship, what we really need is we need more study of the Word, or what we really need is we need more community. Or what we really need is we need more of a focus on the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 00] And I would say, yes, yes, yes to all of that. But emotional maturity is the most important, least talked about aspect of discipleship most of the time.

And at Advent, we strongly desire to have a culture where we are producing mature disciples, spiritually mature followers of Jesus. And the fact of the matter is, you cannot have spiritual maturity without emotional maturity.

It's a key component. The example of the iceberg is often a helpful one. So this is... you see this in a lot of... used in a lot of different ways. But if you think about an iceberg, most of the time you can only see about 10% of the iceberg above the surface of the water, and the remaining 90% sits invisibly under the surface of the water.

And for us as human beings, for those of us who are Christians, that 10% represents the things that we say and do that other people can see, right?

You see about 10% of me in terms of how I act, in terms of how I behave, the kinds of things that I say, how I behave in different situations. You're seeing that 10%, right?

[2 : 18] But the remaining 90% sits under the surface, right? So when you become a Christian, that 10% changes. You start doing things differently.

You start going to church maybe, and you never went to church before. You start learning how to talk like a Christian, how to say the kinds of things that Christians say, how to do the kinds of things that Christians do.

Maybe you even make some life changes. You know, maybe I shouldn't be drinking so much. Maybe I shouldn't be doing the same kinds of things on the weekend. You start to make some adjustments because you're a Christian now in that top 10%.

But 90% of you still sits under the surface of the water. These are the roots of who you are. Your childhood, your emotional world, right?

Shameful memories, insecurities, unaddressed trauma, unmet needs, right?

[3 : 16] Things that sit under the surface. And the fact is, you could be a Christian your whole life for decades, and your faith never penetrates below the surface.

It stays on the top 10% of you. And over time, that can actually result in a disconnect between the 10% of you that people see and the rest of you under the surface.

And so people, over time, can develop almost two selves. There's the self underneath, and there's the self that you project to the world. And that's what we mean by emotionally unhealthy spirituality.

Emotionally unhealthy spirituality means using your faith to hide your sin rather than to heal your sin. So this morning, we're going to look at an example of a man who has this disconnect.

It's developed over years and years and years. His name is Saul, and we read about him in 1 Samuel chapter 15. On the outside, Saul looks like a mature man of God, but there is a disconnect.

[4 : 20] And inside, he is emotionally and spiritually immature. His growth is stunted. So we're going to break this out into two parts. We're going to spend most of our time looking at signs of emotional and spiritual immaturity.

Signs of emotional and spiritual immaturity. And then briefly at the end, we will glance at the path to maturity. And that's what we're going to spend the rest of the series looking at. So let's pray, and then we'll get started.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that it speaks to all parts of us. That Your Word isn't just aimed at our minds. It's not just aimed at the intellect. That You understand that we are psychological, but we are also social.

We are also physical. We are absolutely spiritual. And then we are also emotional. And so we thank You that Your Word speaks to all parts of us and that Your grace has the power to heal all parts of us.

And so now, Lord, I pray that You would guide us as we seek to understand the way Your gospel speaks to and offers hope to all of us. We pray this in Your Son's name. Amen. So the first thing that we're going to look at is in terms of signs of emotional maturity.

[5 : 29] Before we get into this, I just want to give you a little bit of background about Saul and the situation that we find ourselves in. Saul is by every account a very impressive individual. The visible 10% is a very impressive 10%.

He's everything you could hope for in a man of God. He is tall. He is handsome. He is passionate. He is charismatic. He's the kind of guy who would immediately be encouraged to go to seminary.

He's the kind of guy that you would say, you need to be a pastor. You need to be leading a church. He's the kind of guy that you would immediately say, man, we need to get him on the elder board. We need to get him on the vestry.

Right? We need to get him in leadership. He needs to be doing everything up front. He would easily be chosen to be the executive director of a Christian nonprofit. Right? That's the kind of guy we want.

He's going to bring in the money. And Saul actually got off to a great start. I mean, Saul was the kind of guy who was willing to seek advice from others. He was humble. He was willing to listen and learn from others in the early days of his tenure.

[6 : 31] He actually handled criticism fairly well. He was the kind of person who was very clearly devoted to God. The relationship was real. So this isn't kind of a wolf in sheep's clothing. Saul was a genuine follower of the Lord.

Now, fast forward to 1 Samuel chapter 15. There's a people group called the Amalekites. They are nomadic.

They're extraordinarily brutal and violent people. They were the kind of people who preyed upon the weak, and they committed all kinds of atrocities that you can read about. And the fact is they hated Israel from the very beginning.

They were always looking for a chance to attack and plunder Israel. And even though they had been given the opportunity, they had refused to repent. It was very clear that they never would.

It was clear that negotiation was not an option. It was clear that the violence was never going to stop. So there's only one remaining option. God comes to Samuel and says, tell Saul to go and wipe them out.

[7 : 29] But then God is very clear about one thing. He says, this battle, this attack is going to be very different than what you see other nations doing. Because here's the difference.

He says to Saul, after you've defeated the Amalekites, don't take anything. Don't take any of the wealth. Don't take any of the livestock. Don't take any prisoners.

Don't take anything. Why? I don't want you to profit from this even one penny. I don't want you to gain anything from this venture.

And God wants to make it absolutely clear that this is not about money. This is not about land. This is not about conquest. This is not imperialism. This is an act of divine justice.

That's the difference. So Saul goes to battle, and with God's help, Saul is victorious. But then he disobeys God. He brings home the best of the livestock. He brings home their king, Agag, as a prisoner.

[8 : 32] And in the ancient Near East, it was very common if you defeated another nation to bring their king back, and then you'd parade the king around as a display of your own dominance. So that's what's going on there.

So God sends Samuel to confront Saul over this blatant disobedience. And this is what I want to look at, right? This is where we begin to see signs of emotional and spiritual maturity emerge, right?

The 10% can be very convincing, but then hardship strikes. And often it comes through pain. Often it comes through conflict. You confront this impressive, charismatic person.

And all of a sudden, you see signs of deep immaturity start to come out. And this is what we see in Saul. The first thing that we see right away that should be a warning flag to everybody is that at this point in Saul's life, he avoids accountability.

He avoids accountability. Samuel's a prophet, and his job is to hold Saul accountable to God's Word, even when it's hard. And often it is. Often it's not what Saul wants to hear.

[9 : 42] And in verse 11, we find out that Samuel loves Saul. He loves him. Verse 11 tells us that when Samuel learns that he has to confront Saul, that he has to tell Saul that he's lost the throne, he stays up all the night before weeping, because it breaks his heart what he's going to have to do.

But Saul, by this point in the story, has developed a habit of disregarding Samuel's counsel. In chapter 14, the previous chapter, we learned that Saul had actually replaced Samuel for another spiritual advisor, probably somebody who tells him what he wants to hear rather than what he needs to hear from the Lord.

And by the way, that is always a red flag. If there's no one in your life who holds you accountable, if there's no one in your life to whom you have given permission, where you say, if you see anything that's wacky, anything that is out of line, anything that's off in my life, you have a free pass to call that out.

If nobody plays that role in your life, that's a big red flag. If you surround yourself by yes men, that's a big red flag. Right?

Some leaders, and this applies to everybody, but some leaders create a culture of intimidation where nobody around them feels free to disagree with or challenge the decisions they make.

[11 : 11] These are massive red flags of emotional and spiritual immaturity. Right? So that's the first thing we see in Saul. The second thing that he does is Saul denies that there's a problem.

He denies the problem. Samuel has to go looking for Saul. He's not home. And Samuel says, where is he? And they say, well, he went down to Carmel to build a monument for himself. That's a clue as to what Saul's really about.

Right? And so Samuel has to track him down. And Samuel finally tracks him down. And Samuel comes up, and it's very clear why Samuel is there. I mean, everybody knows why Samuel has come. Saul disobeyed.

But Saul comes out, and he gives this unusually warm greeting. He says, blessed be you to the Lord, Samuel. I've performed the commandment of the Lord. This is like him saying, Samuel, my favorite prophet.

How you doing? Good news. I did everything you asked me to do. Isn't this a great day? Let's celebrate. Come on. That's kind of what he's buttering him up.

[12 : 13] And this is a blatant lie. And we know it's a lie because the evidence is all around them. It's kind of a funny scene in a way.

Even as Saul says, I did everything the Lord commanded me to do, he is having to shout over the sounds of bleeding sheep and mooing cows, right?

He's having to shout over the sounds of his disobedience. He brought the livestock back, even though he was told not to. And, you know, one of the most common signs of emotional immaturity is that a person will deny there's a problem even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Why do we do this? Because you can't bear, you can't bear the thought of facing the problem and what it might mean, what it might cost you, what it might necessitate.

And so it's easier to ignore it and pretend like it's not there, right? So you have a weird bump and the bump just stays and stays and stays and you know you should probably get the bump checked out but you're terrified of what the doctor might say and so you just pretend like it's not there and you just go months and months and months and you just pretend like it's not an issue, right?

[13 : 32] And over time, if that's something to worry about, it's going to get worse and worse and worse but you just pretend like it's nothing. Or maybe at this point in your life, you've gotten to the point where you drink almost every night of the week.

It's gone from celebratory every now and then to you're drinking every single night of the week and you often end up drinking more than you originally meant to drink and at this point, you really can't imagine being around other people and socializing without at least one or two drinks to help you relax.

Maybe it's even started to interfere with your work or your relationships. Maybe you even got a DUI at some point and maybe you even joke about the fact that you're an alcoholic but all of that is just to avoid the real possibility that you might be one.

Maybe you feel distant from your spouse. Maybe you've learned to avoid certain topics because you know that they will inevitably lead to conflict. Maybe at this point in your marriage, you are rarely, if ever, intimate.

And when you are, you never really feel connected. And you really can't remember the last time you actually had a good conversation. You sort of are in your own orbits in your home and it's more like a ceasefire coexistence than it is a partnership.

[14 : 44] But you're terrified of what might happen if you were to acknowledge this so you pretend like everything's okay. Right? This is a tendency that we all have. And that's what Saul is doing.

There's no problem here. There's nothing to see. Let's just have fun. Let's just celebrate. But Samuel doesn't fall for it. Samuel is a good friend. I know something's wrong.

Don't deny it. And Samuel in this case has evidence. He says, you say you followed God's commandments. What this is the bleeding of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?

Samuel's saying, there is a problem and there's evidence all around you. He's a good friend. So Saul changes tactics. The next thing we see Saul do is he blame shifts.

Right? He shifts the blame. Verse 15, Saul says, and just imagine, you know, Samuel, Saul, other people kind of standing around. Here's what Saul does. They brought the sheep.

[15 : 43] They brought them from the Amalekites. He says, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God and the rest we've devoted to destruction. In other words, we basically did what God said.

99% of the animals we devoted to destruction, we basically did what God said. But the people, you know people. People will be people.

They insisted we bring a few back, only the best. It wasn't me, it was them. But listen, they did it for a really good reason. The only reason we wanted to bring back these animals is so that we could make a sacrifice to the Lord your God.

All we want to do is worship the Lord. Why do you have to be so mean about it? And there's almost a note of moral indignation here. We're just trying to worship God.

What's your problem? Loosen up, Samuel. Another sign of emotional immaturity is that you're always looking to pass the blame. You know, you're late for a meeting because you overslept, but when you get to the meeting you say, oh, the traffic was horrible.

[16 : 53] And it's like, if there's COVID, there is no traffic, you know. Well, it used to be the case. Or you do subpar, mediocre work, and you say, well, it's my boss's fault.

My boss is not more supportive. My boss didn't give me clear guidelines. I don't feel supported by my boss, and so you do subpar work. By the way, that's a form of passive aggression.

We'll talk about that later in the series. But you pass, it's my boss's fault. Well, I would do better work if my boss was a better boss, right? And people like this are very, very good at turning things around on you.

So if you come to a person who does this and you confront them, you say, you know that thing that you did the other day? That really hurt me. Often, you will end up apologizing to them because they will twist it, and they will make it about the conflict or the confrontation rather than the original incident.

They'll say, oh, there's nothing to see there. The real issue is the way you just confronted me. You just hurt me now. You need to apologize. And you go to try to work it out, and you end up apologizing to them. Why? Blame shifting.

[18 : 01] Right? So if you've ever been in an argument with somebody, and they bring something up that you said, and your response is to say, well, the only reason I said that is because you said this. Classic blame shift.

Right? But again, Samuel, good man, he holds his ground. Samuel says, God gave the command to you, Saul. He didn't give it to the people.

He didn't give it to the soldiers. He gave it to you. You're the one who's responsible. So he holds Saul's feet to the fire. So then Saul tries another tactic.

I mean, it's amazing when you begin to see this mapped out. Saul tries another tactic. Saul can't get away from this by shifting the blame. And so then Saul distorts the truth.

He distorts the truth. And Saul said to Samuel, verse 20, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. He says, listen, Samuel, you got it all wrong. I did exactly what God said.

[19 : 00] Now pay attention to what he then says. I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I've gone on the mission to which the Lord sent me. I brought Agag, the king of Amalek, and I've devoted the Amalekites to destruction.

Now notice what he did there. God never told him to bring Agag back, but he just kind of sneaks it in. Right? Right? I did the mission.

I brought Agag back. I devoted. And Samuel's like, wait, wait, wait. God never told you to bring anybody back. He's revising history, right? He's lying.

He's distorting the truth to justify himself. And, you know, on some level, I think we're all tempted to do this as well. Have you ever had an argument with somebody? And then you go and you tell somebody else about that argument.

And in your version of events, it just so happens that you sound like the most reasonable human being ever to walk the face of the earth. And the other person sounds like a psycho.

[19 : 59] Right? Because your version may just be a little off. Like, all I said was this. And then they did all of this. Aren't they crazy? And then what you want is the person to say, wow, you're so right. Right? You're distorting the truth.

Now, there's a more extreme version of this, what we now call gaslighting in our culture. You know, the term gaslighting is a bit misleading. It comes from a movie made back in the 1940s called Gaslight.

Right? But it's a form of manipulation where the manipulator makes you doubt your own sense of reality. Right? So, they twist your words and use your own words against you.

Or they will flat out deny saying things or doing things even if you have proof. They will revise history and make you doubt your own perception of reality.

They'll make you doubt your sanity. If you've ever dealt with somebody like this, this is often a tactic that abusive people use in order to cover up their abuse. You're crazy. That never happened.

[20 : 58] And if you've ever experienced this, it can make you feel like you're losing your mind. It can make you doubt your own judgment. Right? Now, that's a more extreme version of, I think, something that we all do. But again, Samuel, good man, holds his ground.

And so, finally, after all of this, it looks like Saul is going to own up and finally confess and finally take responsibility.

Saul says, you're right. I have sinned. And you're reading this and you're like, oh, finally, Saul. Just give it up.

But it's just another tactic. Now Saul plays the victim. In verse 24, Saul says to Samuel, I have sinned. Okay.

I've transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words. And that's where he should have shut up. Just stop talking, Saul. Period. End of sentence.

[21 : 56] Stop talking. But he doesn't stop talking. He keeps going. Because I feared the people and I obeyed their voice. Right? He says, you're right. I did it.

I transgressed the commandment of the Lord. I ignored your words. But I had no choice. The people made me do it. Technically, I did wrong. But I was forced to.

They're scary. I'm scared of them. They pressure me. They criticize me. They intimidate me. And you can almost hear him saying, you know, I'm just trying to do my best.

You have no idea what it's like to be in leadership. You have no idea what it's like to be mean to have to deal with all that pressure. Why are you being so mean to me, Samuel? You should feel sorry for me.

And the real message is this. I'm the real victim here. See, a victim mentality is yet another way emotionally immature people avoid having to take responsibility for their lives.

[22 : 57] And a victim mentality essentially means you live life as though you have no agency, as though you have no ability to change anything in your life.

And everything that you do is you only do it because you have no other option. Right? So, all of your problems are someone else's fault. Life happens to you rather than as a result of you.

So, you know, everything, it's society's fault. It's your parents' fault. It's the government's fault. It's your spouse's fault. It's the church's fault. It's never your fault.

It's the church's fault.

It's wrecking his relationship with one of his best friends. It's wrecking his career. You know, he goes on technically to sit in the throne for many more years after this incident. But commentators say this is the beginning of the end for Saul.

[24 : 15] This is when Saul lost it. And from here it's a downhill slide. It just gets worse and worse and worse. But he's doing everything he can to avoid having to own his own sin.

And this is really what sits at the heart of emotional and spiritual immaturity. Self-deception. Self-deception. Self-deception. Self-deception. Self-deception. Self-deception.

Self-deception. Self-deception. Self-deception. very end talking about the path to maturity. What's the alternative? The path to maturity begins by recognizing two things. Number one, we are all tempted to do what Saul does here, to cover up our sin. You may be sitting here listening to what I'm saying and thinking of somebody else in your life. I really need to sit... This person really needs to hear this.

You know, this old boss of mine really needs to hear this. And you know, that's probably legitimate. I mean, it's important to have these experiences. If you've dealt with somebody who was really bad the way Saul is and they manipulated you, you really need people in your life to say, that was wrong what happened to you. That's very important. But the real point of this is not for you to send this to somebody else, it's for us to recognize this in our own lives. And we all have these tendencies, right? We're all tempted to do what Saul did. And in fact, Blaise Pascal writes about this. He's, you know, the mathematician and philosopher in his *pensées*. He writes about the fact that all human beings struggle with this internal tension between two forces. He says, on the one hand, we really want to think well of ourselves. We really want to love ourselves and think highly of ourselves. But on the other hand, there's the truth about ourselves. All our faults, all of our flaws, the bottom 90%, the stuff that we hide, the stuff that we're ashamed of, our sin. And he says, these two things are at odds in us. I want to like myself and think well of myself, but then there's the truth about myself. And so what often happens is our desire to love ourselves wins out, and so we end up suppressing the truth. That self-love becomes an enemy of the truth. In order to like myself and have high self-esteem, I've got to suppress the reality of who I am.

Now, if it goes in the other direction, you can go in the other direction too, and then the truth wins out, and there's no love, and you hate yourself. And that's the road to deep depression and self-hatred, right? It could go either way. But the question he poses is, how do you resolve that tension? How do you love yourself but also deal with the truth about yourself?

[26 : 43] And this leads us to the second thing that we need to recognize. That tension exists in all of us, but Jesus Christ has given us a way to deal with that tension. In other words, Jesus has given us a way to do both, to love ourselves and to be brutally honest about the truth in ourselves.

And this answer is called grace. Grace. Grace is the key. Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross in order to set us free from the penalty of sin. We have to still deal with the power of sin, but Jesus dealt with the penalty of it. It's dealt with. And so because of the cross, God is able to look at us and say, I see the truth about you, right? I see everything there is under the service. He doesn't just see the 10 percent. He sees 100 percent of you, and I delight in you. I delight in you. I've seen it all. I've dealt with it all. I delight in you.

So grace is the antidote to everything we see in Saul's life. Grace is the key. Because grace is where we get the humility to seek out accountability.

Grace is where we get the courage to face our problems. Grace is how we develop the character to accept blame when we need to, when we are in the wrong. Grace is where we get the integrity to uphold the truth because we know it won't destroy us. Grace is how we develop the agency to reject the victim mentality. So the goal of emotionally healthy spirituality is this.

Instead of keeping your faith on the surface, but never letting it penetrate. Emotionally healthy spirituality means using contemplative spiritual practices to gradually apply the grace of the gospel below the surface, to let it come down under the water, to begin to apply it to our emotional world, to begin to apply it to the way that we handle conflict, the way we deal with our own insecurities, the way we process shameful memories, the way we deal with unaddressed trauma. With the vast resource of God's grace and God's Holy Spirit, you can begin to address some of the trauma in your life. Grace is the source of our ability to do all of this.

[29 : 27] And in so doing, we stop hiding, and we stop using our spirituality to hide our sin, and we begin to trust Jesus, who is the great physician, to heal us as only He can do.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You again that we're not just reliant on psychological techniques, but that what we're talking about is nothing short of the Spirit of the God who made us, working in us to make us whole. What we're talking about here is Your renewal of all of creation beginning in us.

And we don't pray for 10% renewal. We pray for 100% renewal, because we know that that is what's possible. So, Lord, I pray that You would work through Your Word in the power of Your Holy Spirit to renew us completely, that we might put Your glory on display and give hope to the rest of the world of what's possible and only possible through Your grace. We pray this in Your Son's name. Amen.