

Letters to Young People - 'Feelings'

by Gary Young on Friday, September 17, 2010 at 5:16am

We all have emotions. At times we feel love, joy, anger, sadness, peace and a wide range of other feelings. When we feel lonely or betrayed, we usually feel sad, while there are also of course things that will cause us to feel a wide range of positive emotions as well. These are the times we particularly remember, and frequently the thing we remember most is the way we felt, the kinds of feelings and emotions that we experienced as a result of that happy time.

But what are emotions exactly? What are they for? How much should we respond to them, or be governed by them? When we think about the people we know in our lives, we can probably think of people whom we regard as 'emotional'; that is, they seem to be very strongly affected by their emotions: on the other hand, we can probably also think of people who sometimes seem to be almost emotionless, and seem unaffected no matter what happens in their life.

Emotions are, essentially, the way we mentally (and sometimes physically) respond to things that happen in our lives. They have a very important part in our lives, too: what is your response, for example, when something makes you angry? The Bible doesn't tell us not to get angry, in fact we are told to DO SOMETHING about that anger:

Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down on your wrath (Ephesians 4: 26).

In other words, we feel the emotion of anger so that we seek a resolution to the thing that made us angry. Just stewing on our anger is pointless, and that is what the verse above means. Instead, fix the problem! Is someone hurting or being unjust to someone we love? Our anger should impel us to protect our friend, to help them to overcome the situation. The emotion by itself won't fix much at all, but it can give us the drive and determination to help us to do what needs to be done.

What about love and affection? These are feelings we all have; so what are they for? Again, these powerful emotions cause us to want to do something, to show the person we feel this way about just how we feel. The emotion by itself will not accomplish anything, but it can make us do something positive when we ACT on that feeling.

Even sorrow and sadness can be thought of in the same way. Sorrow can cause us to try and find a solution to the problem. Even if the problem can't be solved, our sorrow can give us the power to empathise with other people who are suffering, and who need our help. All these emotions have a very important role in our lives, and can help us to help ourselves as well as to help our friends who need our support.

This can also help us to understand how we should respond to our emotions. We all respond in different ways: some of us keep our feelings more hidden, while others tend to show them more openly. There's no 'right' or 'wrong' way here: we're all different, and that's the way it should be; it's the way God made us and the world would be a boring place if we didn't have those differences. But there are a couple of things that we can learn, and that can help us to respond to our emotions in an effective and positive way.

First, we don't have to bury or hide our emotions. As we've seen, our emotions have a real purpose in our lives, and if we try to pretend that we don't have them at all we're denying a part of who we really are. God gave you those emotions to help you be the person you can truly be. It isn't a sign of weakness to show your feelings; it will only hurt you to keep those feelings bottled up inside and it also makes it harder for those who love you to help you when you need it. Feelings aren't something to be ashamed of, they are a very important part of the beautiful person you are.

On the other hand, we shouldn't be mastered by our feelings either. If we allow our emotions to go unchecked, they can consume us. Anger will become hate. Love will become lust. Sorrow will become self-pity. Every emotion has an extreme, a 'dark side' if you like, that is negative and destructive. If we don't learn to control our emotions, we will hurt both ourselves and those around us. We must master our feelings so that we can use them and grow from them in a positive way. "Self control" is one of those positive and good things in our lives that God wants us to have (Galatians 5: 22-23), and we need to have it to help us master our emotions, not be mastered by them.

All of those feelings that we have from time to time help make, and help us to make, this world a better place. Without the love, the laughter, the joy, the peace, even without the sadness and the anger, the world would be dead and barren, and so would we.