

Chapter Eleven

Moving toward Mental Health

Recently I heard a Christian psychiatrist friend of mine answer a question that stimulated my thinking regarding mental health. While he was teaching in a counselor's workshop, somebody asked him, "What is mental health?" In giving an answer, my friend gave me the impression that in psychology mental health was a rather nebulous term. It was interesting to me that such a widely used phrase seemed to defy definition, so I began to ponder the question for myself --what *is* mental health? And beyond merely defining the term, how do we learn to enjoy at least a relative degree of good mental health? Then it occurred to me that the Lord Jesus, in his earthly life and ministry, is a picture of perfect mental health. This thought triggered a series of questions relating to our own situation. For a complete list of these questions, in the form of a self-evaluation, look at Appendix E: "How Is Your Mental Health?"

Tough .Questions

Here are some of the tough questions I had to ask myself-- and which I pose to you. First, "How well can you handle rejection?" Most of us have *plenty* of trouble handling feelings of rejection, thereby showing an impairment of mental health. And the next one, which is related to the first, is "How does your love hold up in the face of rebuff?" Don't answer that yet--just think about it.

When I first put down these questions, it was just for my own information. But then I decided to try them out on somebody else, and my first victim was my wife. Her response was really funny. As she worked through the list in the living room, I was in the next room listening to her reactions. I chuckled as I heard her mumbling to herself with answers like this: "I'm learning" ... "Forget it!" ... "Lousy!" ... "Pretty good" ... "None of your business!"

After she got through, she came into the room where I was and said, "You're sadistic!"

But do you see the beauty of this response? She went through the whole list--a really tough list, and she wasn't threatened or put down. She showed a good degree of mental health. She had the liberty and understanding to realize that she was learning and growing in her ability to handle the difficult, trying things of life through the Lord.

Recently I laid the test on a group of pastors at a seminar and received similar reactions. Yet, in spite of its difficulty-- for all of us--I think it's a valid subject to explore, one that can make us all more fulfilled and mentally healthy. Let's look at a few of the other questions:

How panic-proof are you in the face of pressure?

Are you at rest in the midst of a world in turmoil?

Are you able to relate objectively to the needs of others?

Do you generally have a good sense of personal worth?

How realistic is your assessment of your own importance?

They're pretty penetrating questions, aren't they?

One other question in particular--"How free are you from indulging in emotional thinking?"--makes me think of a girl who came into my office and said, "I want to talk to you about something because I really need an objective view." So we went over the matter together, and I gave her an objective appraisal to which she reacted quite emotionally. As she calmed

down a bit, I said, "It looks to me as if you're indulging in a bit of subjective, emotional thinking." And she replied with

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considerable feeling, "I'm not emotional!" As soon as she said this, she got the point through her own emotional response, and as we laughed together over her subjective reaction, she began to take a more objective view.

The Picture of Health

Now let's look at our model of mental health a little more closely and see what it can mean to our own well-being. As I stated earlier, *the Lord Jesus Christ is the picture of perfect mental health*. If you think through his earthly life and ministry, I think you'll agree with me. He was perfectly poised, loving, unhurried, non-defensive, and objectively at ease in every situation. He showed total emotional stability in the face of pressures the like of which you and I will never have to face. We see a *little* pressure--he got the works! "But," you might respond, "so what if the Lord Jesus epitomizes the absolute in emotional well-being and perfect mental health. What has that to do with anything? *He* has it, but how about us?" I'd like to pursue that and see how the fact that this is true of him really *can* make a difference to us.

Handling Rejection

Let's go through some of these questions again and see how they apply to our Lord. The first one is: "How well can you take rejection?" Think through how the Lord Jesus took rejection. Isaiah writes of him that "he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows..." (Isa. 53:3). Psalms 22:1 and Matthew 27:46 record his agonized cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He suffered absolute and utter rejection, including the rejection of his heavenly Father. He was truly God-forsaken in order that we may *never* have to be. Yet, it says that he trusted to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). Do you see what this is saying? He handled rejection *perfectly* by faith.

He handled rejection such as you and I will *never* have to face, *by faith*. He trusted in the One who had seemingly deserted him.

Love That Doesn't Turn Off

Next question: "How does your love hold up in the face of rebuff?" Thinking of this, I was reminded of the Lord on the cross when they were driving the nails through his hands and his feet. What did he say? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). That's poise in the most dismal of circumstances. If you should try pounding nails through my hands and feet, I'm afraid I wouldn't react *quite* that way. I don't think any of us would, naturally. But the Lord Jesus handled it perfectly. He had perfect mental health, perfect emotional stability.

Know Where You're Going?

Look at another question: "Do you have a clear sense of direction in a confused world?" In checking our Lord's life in regard to this, we need to look at a passage from the Gospel of John:

The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? *If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him*" (John 11:8-10, italics mine).

On this occasion, Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. And what the Lord was saying is: "Really, I know what I'm doing; there's no problem in going back into Judea, even though I *was* threatened." You see, he had a perfect sense of timing and security in the midst of threatening circumstances because he had clear directions from his heavenly

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Father. His purpose was to go where he was needed, even in the face of danger, to raise Lazarus from the dead--and thereby demonstrate who he was. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life..." (John 11:25). For him there was no problem; in a situation where his disciples demonstrated they were part of the confused world, Jesus had a clear sense of direction. In our human frailty you and I identify with his disciples, but in Christ we can identify with *him* and maintain our poise.

Value Systems

Here's another question: "How fulfilling is your value system?" That's a deeply significant and far-reaching probe-- one well worth thinking through. Many of the value systems men have adopted are totally unfulfilling. But if there's one thing I've learned about the Lord, it's that he wants us to be totally fulfilled people. He really cares that we have it all. He loves us so much that he doesn't want us to miss out on any good thing--that's the way he's disposed toward us. So we need to look at his value system and check *ours* against *his*.

Winning by Losing

Jesus expressed his value system this way: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25).

Do you see what he's saying? He uses as an illustration a little grain of wheat, and says, *unless it falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone*. But, he says, *if* it dies, it bears *mu ch* fruit. Then he follows with the application to us: *He who* loves his life loses it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for *eternal life*. In other words, if I seek to gratify my own self-centered desires, I'm going to lose out because that's not the way things are in God's program. The world's value system is quite the opposite from our Lord's; it says "grab all you can, with both hands!" There's an enemy who has distorted man's thinking so that the world's value systems are all twisted.

The Lord Jesus wants us to get our values straight. He proved that he had his straight, because essentially he was talking about his own dying and bringing forth much fruit. And I'm part of that fruit; I have eternal life through his dying for me. Through most of my earlier years I was either atheistic or agnostic--God was nowhere in my program. But his love, expressed in the cross, got to me; nothing else would have reached my indifferent heart. When I really began to understand this principle of dying in order to live, employed by the Lord himself in the cross, I couldn't fight that. Love is the hardest thing in the world to fight. You don't fight it--you *join* it.

But the point is this: The Lord's value system was perfect. He not only told us that we were to fling away our lives and not to hang on like the world does, but he also showed us the way--by giving his life for us. The Scripture records of him, "Therefore God has highly exalted him..." (Phil. 2:9).

He says that if we're willing to lay our life on the line, then we will *gain* it. He is speaking here in spiritual terms, of our being self-giving instead of self-seeking. The one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. When he says, "He who hates his life in this world," we need to understand what he means by this. He's not saying we're to hate our life as related to the *created* world, for his creation is wholly to be admired and enjoyed. Rather, he is speaking of the world *system*, which has things so badly mangled by its fogged-up thinking. We are surely free to love the created world. I live in a forest setting, and I never get over its beauty. Our Lord knows we're not to hate this world; he wants us to be thankful for all he's put before us--the beauty and blessing of his own provision for us. But we *are* to hate worldly philosophies and thought

patterns which are in opposition to him.

What does the Lord Jesus mean by hating one's life, though? That's the real issue at stake. As I see it, it all revolves around the illustration of the grain of wheat. In the case of that little kernel, it had to pour out the life it contained in order to bring forth multiplied life. In our case, as men and women, it involves considering our own plans and ambitions for worldly success and approval in low regard for the sake of others' good. Essentially, it means dying that others may live, just as with the grain of wheat. And the result for us and others is eternal, abundant life. It's the interesting paradox of winning by losing, of gaining by giving, of victory through surrender.

Also, we need to understand that *eternal life* in the Bible is literally "the life of the ages." It's unending because it is God's life, and it isn't just the life that we look forward to in eternity--it's life that is to begin *here and now*. *I have* eternal life now because the Lord has given it to me. I have it because he lives in me and he is eternal. He'll never end, and I'll never end because he lives in me. But the key thing about this life, the life of the ages, is that it is a new quality of life-- it's not just endless quantity. For some, an endless quantity of the "status quo" would be an eternal hell, wouldn't it? Our Lord is talking about a renewed quality of life--that abundant life he has promised to his own.

I Want My Rights!

Let's consider one last question: "How willing are you to forego your rights?" When I think of this proposition, an old familiar story comes to mind. There was a dispute among the leadership in a church in which one of the leaders pounded the table and said, "I demand my rights!" One of his Christian brothers quietly replied, "Friend, if you had your rights, you'd be in hell!" He's right, and it's true of all of us. Again,

"How willing are you to forego your rights?" There's a current line of teaching which says that Christians don't have any rights, but that's not so--it's easy to prove scripturally. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul talks about his rights. So we *do* have rights. But our highest right or privilege is to be willing to *forego* the exercise of our rights. Why? Because that's what our Lord did. This is pictured for us in Philippians,

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

Here we see our Lord actually setting aside by his own volition his right to exercise the prerogatives of his deity. He willingly stepped down from heaven to earth into the human family and entered history as a baby in a cave made to shelter animals--from heaven's glory to a grubby little manger. I always like to remember that it was a dirty stable--there was undoubtedly manure on the floor. It wasn't like the pictures on our Christmas cards. Into this humble scene stepped the Lord of glory, foregoing his rights. He could have stayed in heaven and said, "All that miserable lot down there--that bunch of rebels--can go to hell." And he would have been perfectly righteous in doing it. (I don't know if you believe that, but I do. It's true, because we're a rebel race at heart, and God owes salvation to *none* of us.)

But he didn't do that. He said, "All those rebels are dear to me; they need me. They need the expression of love that only I can give. They need a Savior. If it means I must move into that earthly vale of tears and forego my rights, I'll do it!" So he came, the sinless Son of God, and was made sin for us that we might be reconciled to God through him: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them..." (2 Cor. 5:19). This is the central fact of unqualified love that never changes. Who doesn't want that kind of love? It became available to us because Christ was willing to set aside the exercise of his rights.

Peace with God

In the setting aside of his rights to die for us, Jesus accomplished an otherwise impossible feat: our

justification before God. The Webster Dictionary definition of justification is most revealing: *to be justified is to be declared blameless of sin* on the ground of Christ's righteousness, imputed by faith. Webster knew his theology, it appears. If there is anything that all of us want (in our right mind at least), it is to be declared blameless of sin. It isn't that we haven't sinned --we have, and we frankly acknowledge it, I trust. But what we all need is some way of dealing with it. That's what God has given us in the reconciling work of his Son, making us right with God. This is the essential good news of the gospel: that God has made perfect provision for us, from our estranged state, to enter back into a love relationship with him. What he is really saying is this: "I'm not fighting you, now why don't you stop fighting me?"

That's the beginning of mental health --to have peace between you and God. As long as you're fighting the one who made you, you'll never be in anything but turmoil. You begin to enter into mental health by saying, "Thanks, Lord, for making perfect provision in the cross to put away my sins." And in that same text in 2 Corinthians it says there's only one action needed on your part: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). God doesn't hold back--if there's any holding back, it is *on our part*. Our emotional well-being and good mental health start when we stop holding back and submit willingly to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That's what will bring peace of heart and freedom from guilt to those we counsel. Not only that, but he offers his loving presence and guidance to those who acknowledge his Lordship. Our mental health is directly proportional to how well we're relating to the resources available to us in Jesus Christ.

Available on Demand

And to those who know Him, good mental health is available, on demand, by faith. It is a matter of simply responding to the Lord in the way that he's made available to us. "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be seen to be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7 KJV). A beautiful figure--an earthen vessel--that's just an old clay pot, you know. It is usually slightly cracked, yet it contains a tremendous treasure--the Lord Jesus himself. Christian life is enjoying the fact that a very flawed vessel contains a wonderfully beautiful and attractive treasure--the Lord himself. If we understand this, there is no more need to "fake it," no big "cover up" is necessary. We can just be ourselves in Christ. What a relief! Then we are simply in our right minds, responding to our indwelling Lord, thus becoming display cases for the great treasure that the Lord has invested in us--himself!

In ourselves, we're wholly inadequate--perfectly equipped to do absolutely nothing that's worthwhile and permanent. But the Lord says, "You're right, I know you're inadequate, but you have me, don't you?" And on that basis, we can handle anything that comes. That's fabulous truth, and it's the basis of mental health.

Achieving Wholeness--A Process

You can find out how well you're responding to his life by reviewing the remaining questions on the self-evaluation in Appendix E. It's just for your information--it's a personal inventory. You don't have to share it with anybody. And you need not feel threatened by it, for the Lord Jesus is available to give you perfect mental health. But whether you choose to review the questions or not, you can begin to relate more closely to the adequacy of the risen Lord Jesus who lives in you (I trust) and thus enjoy mental health. Then you can share the wealth of this great treasure with those whom you are trying to help.

Just think through these questions in terms of how we are to relate to the Lord Jesus. If you're like everybody else, you'll say, "I'm not doing so hot, but I'm growing. I'm learning." And that's where everybody is. Nobody has arrived at perfection, as I'm sure you're aware. We're all men and women under construction. But thank God for a *great* Building Contractor (a former carpenter) who knows his business.

The process is described as follows "...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the *renewal of your mind* ..." (Rom. 12:1 b, 2, italics mine).

As we allow the Lord Jesus to be constantly renewing our mind, we are enjoying good mental health.

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