

LOVE THE LORD



Lesson Twenty - How do emotions develop, what purpose do they serve?

August 2023

Summary of key points

- We begin to feel many emotions before we have the ability to understand, accept, express, and practice self control over them.
- Our emotions drive our outlook on life, our memories, our self-image, and our relationships with God and with people.
- Emotions impact our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. They affect how much we are willing to put our trust in God.
- The world teaches us to cope with stressful emotions in ungodly ways.
- Most people never receive proper emotional nurturing.
- As believers, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to guide our emotional lives so that we do not sin.
- God is the God of all comfort and He will guide us through our emotions.

Watch the lesson online

<https://youtu.be/C3eHuYFtRlk>

Transcript

Welcome to lesson 20 of Love the Lord where we describe how our emotional development affects all of our life patterns.

Let us begin by inviting God to speak to us personally through this study. Please follow along as we pray together. Click pause at any point if you need more time.

First, let's thank God for His perfect character and will for us.

Next, please tell Him about the things that have been stressful and ask for His help and guidance.

Let us now put down our burdens of sin and confess the ways we have sinned against God and against others, and ask for His forgiveness.

Please also confess the ways others have sinned against us, and forgive them in Jesus' name.

Next, let us ask God to purify and open our hearts to receive His teaching.

Finally, please repeat these words, “In Jesus’ name, I silence all distractions and voices that are not from God. Amen.”

Let's begin the lesson for today. How do emotions develop and what purpose do they serve?

We will begin today’s lesson with a quiz. You simply need to give a number in response to each of the five questions. Ready? Let’s begin.

Question one; what percentage of our decisions involve our emotions?

We may make impulsive decisions once in a while but most of us consider ourselves to be rational and logical people.

But the reality is that our emotions can account for around 90% of our decision-making, according to various scientific research. Our consumer behaviour, for instance, is heavily influenced by how we feel. If we feel anxious about money, we will decide to spend as little as possible. If we feel pleased with ourselves, we may buy something on impulse to treat ourselves. If we envy someone’s new purchase, we may decide to get it too.

In fact, neuroscience has even found that people who have experienced physical damage in the area of the brain where emotions are generated cannot make even very simple decisions such as where to eat or what to eat, because they are unable to feel. Our decisions are very closely tied to how we feel.

Understanding our emotional state is crucial to following Jesus. Our spirits may be willing to follow Him but our body can be weakened by fleshly emotions such as fear, anger, grief, bitterness, or resentment. Being more self-aware about our emotions can help us make wiser decisions.

Matthew 26:41 “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (NIV)

Question two; at what age do our brains fully form?

When our brains are fully formed, then our ability to assess risk, think logically, and control our emotional impulses can also be said to have reached full potential.

The answer to this question is around 25 years, or in some cases, even right up to our 30’s. This is when our brains can fully pay attention, formulate complex plans, practice self-discipline, and avoid impulsive

behaviours. It seems our brains fully mature a few years later than the typical legal adult age in many countries.

This should not excuse us for being immature in our thinking and behaviour because all of us can go to God for wisdom at any age.

James 1:5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.” (NLT)

Question three: at what age did you start experiencing your first emotions?

Most of us can say if we had a happy or unhappy childhood but are probably unable to pinpoint the time we first felt our first emotions.

The fact is, our emotional development began before we were even born. This should not be surprising, given that God gave our spirits life inside the womb, from the time we are conceived.

Scientists believe babies in the womb can recognise love, happiness, sadness, and stress, and are affected by their mothers’ emotions and their mother’s stress or pleasure hormones. From our mother’s womb, our spirits would have begun to perceive if the outside world felt dangerous to come out to or not. “Is mummy happy, sad, agitated, or afraid? Does the world outside feel happy and safe, or stressful and foreboding? Can I look forward to being born or do I feel safer to stay inside?”

Such prenatal experiences can have lasting effects on our subsequent emotional well-being because of the imprints they leave on our spirits.

Thankfully, the Bible shows us that even in the womb, God’s Spirit would have been present with our spirits as we were being formed.

Psalms 139:13,15-16 You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born... (NLT)

He would have been quietly helping us and teaching us even there, if we were willing to follow Him.

Psalms 51:5-6 For I was born a sinner— yes, from the moment my mother conceived me. But you desire honesty from the womb, teaching me wisdom even there. (NLT)

Question four: If we began to feel happy or sad inside the womb, when do you think we started to first feel guilty or ashamed?

We feel guilty when we think we have done something wrong, but we feel ashamed when we think there is something wrong with us.

Feelings of guilt and shame start when we are very little. Child psychology studies show that they begin from around two to three years old, long before we have the ability to understand the truth about ourselves and about the world.

Some of us may still feel guilty and ashamed about the things we have done as children or as teenagers. Thankfully, when Jesus becomes our Saviour and Teacher, we are to renew our minds and put away our childish ways of reasoning and thinking. When we have experienced God's grace and forgiveness for our sins, our guilt and shame will be washed away, as we receive a new identity through Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. (NIV)

Question five: When do you think we started to form our self-image?

We often form our self-image based on how other human beings feel about us. Do they welcome us? Do they think we look capable? Do they like us?

Studies of small children suggest that we start to develop our self-esteem and body image from the age of three onwards. This is not only based on what adults have said to us but more crucially, what unspoken messages their actions conveyed to us.

If they told us that they love us but yet spent little time playing with us, we may interpret this to mean that we are not worthy of their love and affection. If our parents frequently lost their patience with us, we may interpret their frustrations as meaning that we must be an annoyance and burden to them — even though their behaviour could have been due to other factors, such as sickness, stress, or financial burdens, and so on.

Out of the five questions, how many did you get correct? How aware have you been about the importance of your emotions?

1. Decisions | Almost all decisions influenced by emotions
2. Emotional discipline | Brains and self-control mature by 25 years
3. First emotions | Felt in the womb
4. First guilt, shame | Likely before 3 years old
5. First self-image | From 3 years old

The goal of this quiz is to help us see that our emotions have played a major role in all our decisions and they have led our choices long before we had the ability to think rationally. Our emotions came into play long before we had cultivated any ability to discern and practice wisdom, let alone study the Bible.

This is why the Bible tells us to guard our hearts above all else because it determines the course of our lives.

Proverbs 4:23 Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life. (NLT)

A set of twins can grow up in the same household, for instance, but because they felt differently about it, they will develop different outlooks and outcomes in life. So, how we handle our emotions will decide the paths we take.

Our emotions affect our thoughts, our impulsive reactions, and our choices. Our emotions can also set off physical reactions in our bodies that we cannot control, and affect our spiritual well being and relationship with God.

Our emotions drive

1. how we feel about our lives, which affects our outlook and our memories;
2. how we feel about ourselves, which will affect our identity and self-image;
3. how we feel about others, which will affect our relationships, and
4. how we feel about God and affect whether we are willing to believe, trust, and obey Him.

Our emotions help form a map for how we feel about this world and how we navigate our lives around it. They can lead us to dangerous places if we are not more careful and self-aware. Therefore, the sooner we learn to understand our emotions, the better.

We don't often think about talking to God about our emotions but God is very interested in our emotional well-being because He is a God of emotions.

On a number of occasions, our Father God has described Himself as being "compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, filled with unfailing love, and faithfulness." Notice that compassion, mercy, anger, love, and faithfulness are all linked to emotions. Because we are made in God's image, we are also emotional beings.

Exodus 34:6-7 The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. (NLT)

Notice that the fruit of the Holy Spirit includes emotions as well as emotional self-discipline. These are ways that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (NLT)

In addition, the Holy Spirit convicts our hearts of sin and God's righteousness. Conviction is also driven by emotions.

John 16:8 And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. (NLT)

So are faith, hope, and love, which last forever. So we see that God's Spirit very much relates with us through our emotions, and not just our thoughts.

1 Corinthians 13:13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love... (NLT)

Now, let's look at what this world teaches us about emotions.

Many of us have been taught not to cry because crying is immature, weak, inconsiderate, or just a waste of time. Or not to show our true feelings because we fear people might take advantage of us or reject us. Or not to look upset or unhappy because we fear that that would make us unpopular. We may be judged by other people unfavourably. Or not to accept and understand stressful emotions, because we should only be positive at all times. Or not to be emotional at all, because our genuine emotions have made someone else feel uncomfortable. It was inconvenient for them. Or not to process how we feel and just get on with life, because there are more important things to do. Or not to talk about our pain because others have it worse. We were made to feel selfish and ashamed for having our own emotional needs. Or not to show too much excitement or enthusiasm because we have learnt to fear that good things don't last forever. Or not to show any fear because we must be strong in order to survive.

1. "Don't cry."
2. "Don't show your true feelings."
3. "Don't look upset or unhappy."
4. "Don't be negative. Be positive."
5. "Don't be so emotional."
6. "Don't dwell on things. Just get over it."
7. "Don't talk about your pain. Others are worse."
8. "Don't show too much excitement."
9. "Don't show fear."

What all this does is that it slowly kills us off emotionally until our hearts become stifled, trapped and stuck, lifeless and numb. Sometimes, this manifests as a feeling of low level anxiety and restlessness. Basically, we have no peace.

On the other hand, the Bible teaches us that there is a time for every emotion and activity under the sun. There is an appointed time to cry, to laugh, to grieve, to love, as well as to hate evil.

Ecclesiastes 3:1,4,8 For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve ... A time to love and a time to hate... (NLT)

It is important to remember that God created every single human emotion and calls each one of them “very good”. Every emotion acts as a signal or a piece of information that we need God’s guidance on, on how to react to.

Genesis 1:31 Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! (NLT)

He also gives us our tears for a reason. Are you aware that we have three types of tears and they each serve different purposes?

- **Basal tears** help to lubricate and protect our eyes, and supply nutrition to it.
- **Reflex tears** are created when something irritates the eye and needs to be flushed out.
- **Emotional tears**, however, help to excrete stress hormones from the body through crying, and produce endorphins, our body’s natural pain killer.

So we see that God created emotional tears to help us in our healing. We harm ourselves when we choke back emotional tears that are meant to bring us relief in our spirits. Is it any wonder that people end up suffering from chronic aches and pains, mental and emotional issues?

We are not meant to be afraid to cry or to be fearful of our emotions. God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and self-discipline. As Jesus’ disciples, we are meant to be led by love and not by fear. Emotional self-discipline means that we will acknowledge how we truly feel before God and choose to follow His will, in terms of what we do with our emotions.

2 Timothy 1:7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. (NLT)

In other words, we let the Holy Spirit guide our emotional lives. Which emotions should we react to and which should we not react to? We should not ignore or suppress our emotions. Instead, we go to the Holy Spirit for wisdom, because He is the Master of self-discipline.

Galatians 5:16 So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. (NLT)

Let us read Psalm chapter 78 verses 38 to 41 together, “*Their hearts were not loyal to him. They did not keep his covenant. Yet he was merciful and forgave their sins and did not destroy them all. Many times he held back his anger and did not unleash his fury! Oh, how often they ... grieved his heart in that dry wasteland. Again and again they tested God's patience and provoked the Holy One of Israel.*” (Psalm 78:38-41 NLT)

Just as God has not treated us as we deserve or how we have provoked Him, we should apply the same attitude towards others if we want to be transformed into our Heavenly Father's image.

2 Corinthians 3:18 So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image. (NLT)

It is God's love for us that compels us to demonstrate patience and grace towards others in spite of how we feel, because God's love covers a multitude of sins.

1 Peter 4:8 Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. (NLT)

Unfortunately, most people don't get tutored on their emotions and what to do with them. Experiencing new emotions as children can be confusing and stressful for our undeveloped brains. Without proper guidance, we would naturally come to childish conclusions.

Children need and benefit from good role models who demonstrate healthy emotional lives and self-discipline, as well as a safe environment to explore, understand, and accept their emotions.

They need guidance on how to recognise and manage their emotions and given the vocabulary to communicate how they feel so they don't feel stuck and frustrated over their pent-up emotions.

Children also need time and respect to express their feelings and to be heard, and to have the freedom to cry when they feel the need to.

Most importantly, they need to be taught that God welcomes them, regardless of their emotional state.

Ideal emotional nurturing from young

1. Role models: Healthy emotional self-discipline
2. Exploration: Explore, understand, accept emotions
3. Guidance: Recognise and manage emotions
4. Vocabulary: Communicate emotions
5. Expression: Learn to express self respectfully
6. Crying: Freedom to cry
7. Relating with God: Go to God in spite of emotions

Unfortunately, most of us — including our own parents — have not received such emotional tutoring. We want to emphasise here that we should not judge our parents for not providing the emotional nurturing that we needed, because our parents did the best that they could, based on their own personal upbringing and circumstances. Without consistent emotional nurturing, no one is able to fully identify what they are truly feeling inside, let alone teach someone else.

Most of us will be able to name primary emotions, such as happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, fear, and surprise, but may struggle to describe other related emotions.

Take sadness for example. Sadness alone can be related to these 30 emotions and more! Imagine the hundreds of emotions that we can feel across all six primary emotions, ranging from happiness to surprise.

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|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1. Abandoned | 11. Heartbroken | 21. Powerless |
| 2. Accused | 12. Heavy hearted | 22. Regretful |
| 3. Ashamed | 13. Hopeless | 23. Remorseful |
| 4. Dejected | 14. Ignored | 24. Unfavoured |
| 5. Despair | 15. Inferior | 25. Sorry |
| 6. Depressed | 16. Isolated | 26. Sorrowful |
| 7. Discouraged | 17. Lonely | 27. Trapped |
| 8. Empty | 18. Orphaned | 28. Troubled |
| 9. Forgotten | 19. Overlooked | 29. Victimised |
| 10. Grieved | 20. Pessimistic | 30. Vulnerable |

In our lesson on coping mechanisms, we talked about how we can react to stressful emotions in ungodly ways.

Here are some examples of how our sinful nature turns to fleshly coping mechanisms in order to deal with feeling sad.

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1. Denial: “No, I am not sad. I am fine.”
 2. Blame: “I’ll blame others so that I can focus on something else.”
 3. Rationalisation: “I’ll use my mind to conquer my sad feelings.”
 4. Numbing: “I’ll push my emotions down so I don’t have to feel.”
 5. Performance: “I’ll work on something to make me feel better.”
 6. Sleep: “I’ll go to sleep to escape.”
 7. Fantasy: “I’ll create an alternative reality to run away to.”
 8. Drugs: “I’ll take some drugs to change my mood.”
 9. New age spirituality: “I’ll use new age healing therapies.”
 10. Porn/masturbation: “I’ll make myself feel wanted and loved.”

Do you recognise any of these coping mechanisms as your own? These may be some of the ways that this world copes with stressful emotions, but as believers, we need to see that none of them lead us back to God.

God is the God of all comfort. Only He can restore us deep in our spirits when we feel like we have been crushed. Nothing we can do will ever reach that deep or feel so freeing or healing as the Holy Spirit’s work inside us.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 ... God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others... (NLT)

Sometimes, we can be so focused on coping with our emotions that we miss seeing that God really does care for us and how we feel. We just need to humble ourselves under His mighty power and seek Him with all our hearts.

1 Peter 5:6-7 So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. (NLT)

But when we don’t humbly confess and release all our sadness, hurts, grudges, judgements, and bitterness to God, and forgive those who have hurt or terrorised us, we will fail to experience the fullness of God’s comfort, because we have not first chosen to follow Jesus and live a holy life, completely submitted to God, the Father.

Hebrews 12:14-15 ... work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many. (NLT)

But for those who do choose to live righteous lives, God will stay close and rescue us when our spirits are crushed and our hearts are troubled. And He will come to the rescue every time we go to Him for comfort and healing. Isn't that a beautiful promise to us?

Psalm 34:18-19 The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. The righteous person faces many troubles, but the Lord comes to the rescue each time. (NLT)

God's comfort will give us renewed hope and cheer, and such a hope will not lead to disappointment because we will all get to personally experience how dearly God loves us as the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with the Father's love. This is something we will feel, quite literally.

Psalm 94:18-19 I cried out, "I am slipping!" but your unfailing love, O Lord, supported me. When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer. (NLT)

Romans 5:5 And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. (NLT)

The good news for followers of Jesus Christ is that it doesn't matter how much or how little emotional nurturing we received as children. When Jesus becomes our Saviour, God the Father enters into a relationship with us and the Holy Spirit will begin to teach us everything we need to know.

John 14:26 But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. (NLT)

It is never too late to grow in our emotional development as God's children — as long as we are willing to repent of our coping mechanisms and ask God to heal and guard our hearts. The Holy Spirit is a good and faithful Healer and Teacher, and the peace of heart and mind that He has given to so many others, He will give to us too. So let us not be troubled or afraid.

John 14:26-27 ... the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. (NLT)

We close today's lesson with a prayer to invite the Holy Spirit to teach us how to react to our emotions. If you are ready, let's pray this prayer together.

"Heavenly Father, I confess I don't always know myself or my motives because I don't understand all my emotions. Holy Spirit, I humble myself and ask You to please teach me how to feel about things and how to react. I want to become more like You and live with love, power, and self-discipline. Forgive me

for the times I reacted badly to my emotions and sinned against You and against others. Comfort me in my hidden anxieties and fill me with Your unfailing love. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

We praise God for your humility to seek Him with all your emotions. In our next lesson, we will discuss more about our emotions.

Now, please refer to the reflection questions for today's lesson and sit with the Holy Spirit. Allow Him to minister to you and show you the truth. Please prepare your answers before your small group meeting and watch the following testimony. We pray that you will be blessed. See you next time.

Time for reflection

1. What have you believed about emotions in general?
2. Who or where did you learn those beliefs from?

Watch the testimony for this lesson



Personal notes