

Letting it Out Well

Hey guys, hope you're doing well. If you've got a bible, go ahead and open to Matthew 26. Today we kick off a new series we've called *All the Feels*, where we're looking at how to understand and process our emotions as human beings. And throughout most of the series, we'll be using the book of Psalms as a guide to do that. But today, I want to spend most of our time looking at one particular account of Jesus' life by way of set-up.

The passage we're going to read, we actually referenced just a couple weeks ago when Marcus talked about unanswered prayer. But today, I want us to look at it from a little bit of a different vantage point. I want us to look at it as a window into the inner *emotional* life of Jesus himself. I think this passage provides us with a great case study in how Jesus dealt with his emotions. So we'll read some of it here upfront, then we'll talk about it sort of at a bird's eye view, and then circle back around to some specifics after while. So take a look with me, Matthew 26, starting in v. 36:

[36] Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." [37] And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [that is, two other disciples James and John], he [Jesus] began to be sorrowful and troubled. [38] Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."

And the story goes on—we'll cover the rest here in a bit. All I want you to see for now is **how emotionally impacted Jesus is by his imminent death**. It's like this thick, black cloud hanging over his head. It says that he is "sorrowful." The word for *sorrowful* here is much stronger than it sounds in English. It's not just that he's sad—it's that he is experiencing deep, visceral, emotional turmoil or pain. The word used is actually related to the word used for the pain of *childbirth*. So ladies in the room who have been through that, I have not experienced that, but I have been in the room where it was happening. And based on *that*, if it's okay with you I'm gonna go ahead and put that type of pain in the category of *strong to severe*. That fair? So Jesus is feeling *that level* of deep, visceral, emotional turmoil.

And if you read through the gospels, this is far from the *only* time Jesus visibly expresses emotion. **Throughout his life we see Jesus express anger, heartache, sadness, exhaustion, joy, isolation—just to name a handful. Jesus was an emotional guy.** And by that, I don't mean that he was emotionally *fragile* or *mastered by* his emotions—I just mean that he had no problem having noticeable, passionate emotional responses to things that deserved those types of responses. I think some of us have this tendency to see Jesus as this robotic, almost Spock-like character who just floats around effortlessly and rises above all the chaos and confusion and disappointment of life. For instance, to this day, in my head, when I read a line from Jesus in the gospels, I hear it internally almost like the narrator of an audiobook. Very peaceful sounding, and almost like any emotion is pretend emotion for him. I don't know if you've ever thought that way too or not. But that's *not* the Jesus we get in the bible. **Jesus in the bible is very dialed into, and appropriately expressive of his emotions.**

Now, I think for some of us, the word "emotions" can carry almost a trivial-sounding connotation. "It's just our feelings." But I would suggest—and a lot of other, *smarter* people have suggested too—that **our emotions are one of the most important components of who we are as human beings**. To the point

that a number of people have noted that we as **human beings are primarily emotional—not rational—creatures**.¹ Not only do humans experience a wide *range* of emotions, but emotions are a very crucial piece of who we are. To think about it in very simple terms, imagine if you were driving down I-40, and an 18-wheeler started to veer into your lane. Most of us would feel at least the slightest bit of *fear*, and we'd swerve out of the way or change lanes altogether. That's an emotion—*fear* is a feeling. And a very important one at that. If you do not feel fear in a situation like that, you might not *survive*. Similarly, imagine that one of your friends just had one of their closest family members pass away unexpectedly, and you went to go take them food and be with them. If they weren't sad or emotional whatsoever, we would actually start to believe that something was seriously wrong with them.

My point is that our emotions *matter*. So when we talk about emotions, we're not talking about "just our feelings." We're talking about the very basics of how we function as human beings in everyday life. All the data would point to the fact that you actually *need some* emotion to be able to *live life*. Our emotions are essential. So a conversation all about our emotions and how to understand them through the lenses of the Scriptures, seems like a conversation well worth having, whether we want to have that conversation or not.

Now, I do realize that by doing an entire series about our emotions, I run a risk. That risk is that some of you may be tempted to check out on me. Some of you may not be all that interested in a series all about emotions. Namely, those of you that do not think you are very emotional, and think you are more rational. There's a popular sentiment out there that "some people are rational, and some people are emotional. And really, if all these emotional people could just be more rational, we'd all be better off." You hear it sometimes presented as men and women—people love to say that "women are emotional, and men are rational."

In case you couldn't tell by the mocking tone in my voice, I do not find that a very compelling belief to hold. It is not even a little bit true that men don't have emotions. Now by that, maybe you *mean* to say that *some* people are more *in touch with* or *expressive of* their emotions than *other* people are. And I'm sure that's true. But that doesn't mean that some people don't *have* emotions. If you don't experience emotions, that does not make you a man. That makes you a *robot*. And we have a very strict "no robots" policy here at City Church. Call me crazy—I've just seen way too many movies where the robots end up killing everybody.

But on a much more serious note, here's why I think it would be good for us to re-examine that belief. I would suggest—and I don't even think it would take much work to prove this—that **some of the most interpersonal damage in the world has been caused by people in general, and men specifically, who didn't know how to correctly understand and express their emotions**. There is so much at stake in how we relate to our emotions. Not just in regards to our *own* well-being, but the well-being of *others* as well. So if you guys are good with it, let's just be done with this sentiment that some people don't experience emotion. Emotions have a proper *place*, and that's part of what this series is all about. But we all *have* emotion.

I think one other thing that could be happening when we say "we don't have emotions" is that our definition of the word *emotion* is just too narrow. I think it's easy to go, "well I don't really ever get visibly

¹ As a small sampling, this case has been made [here](#) and [here](#).

angry, and I don't cry very often, so I guess I'm just not an emotional person." But those are just *two* of dozens, maybe even hundreds, of human emotions. Just because we don't experience the most *basic* emotions in stereotypical, obvious ways, doesn't mean we don't experience emotion in *general*. **We all experience emotion, and how we deal with those emotions truly matters.**

Now **for followers of Jesus, our ability to understand and process our emotions isn't just important in general, it is essential to our *discipleship to Jesus*.** Pete [Scazzero](#), a pastor who wrote a book all about emotional health,² puts it this way:

*It is not possible for a Christian to be **spiritually mature** while remaining **emotionally immature**.*

But here's the thing: plenty of people try to pretend it *is* possible—you may know some of them.. **There are probably *thousands* of followers of Jesus in our country right now trying to operate as if their *emotional* maturity has nothing to do with their *spiritual* maturity.** No doubt there are people who have been following Jesus for *years* and yet still will not deal with a deep, residing bitterness or resentment towards someone they know. People who know tons of Scripture but have no idea how to emotionally respond to the slightest bit of adversity in their life. People who pray *hours* a day but can't keep a job for any length of time because they immediately make enemies everywhere they work. And we could do the thing where we say "oh that person's a great person—you just want to make sure you never get on his bad side." "Oh she loves Jesus, it's just that nobody really likes being around her ever." We can try to do that and turn a blind eye to what's really going on in a person's soul. Or **we could acknowledge, like Pete Scazzero does, that our emotions *matter* in our relationship to Jesus. That they are a vital part of *who we are*.** Not over here, off to the side. But right there, in the midst of everything.

I'll say it more directly—**if you are a follower of Jesus, you cannot construct a concrete wall in your heart between your spiritual life and your emotional life**—it just won't work. We are *integrated* beings: spiritual and emotional and physical and relational—all rolled up into one. Which means **if we are going to get anywhere in our discipleship to Jesus, we aren't going to be able to *bypass* our emotions. They're a part of who we are.** We'd be better off asking the question, *how do we handle, process, and express our emotions well?* And that's what we're attempting to do with this series.

Now, when it comes to *how* people deal with our emotions, I think there are predominantly two popular methods out there. And this will lead us right back to Matthew 26 and how Jesus handled *his* emotions. But I think there are two popular approaches people take to their emotions. We'll take a brief look at each of them.

Approach #1: Suppress them.

What some people do in regards to any type of emotion is that they just suppress them. Ignore them, pretend they aren't even there in the first place. Just so we're clear, if you were one of the people who said "I don't have emotions"—that means you're in *this* category. And if it offends you to hear me say that—see? I told you you experience emotion! This approach to our emotions is so perfectly modeled by the character Cal Naughton Jr. in the cinematic masterpiece, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky*

² The book is called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* and overall it's fantastic.

Bobby. In one scene where he's talking about his emotions, he says to Ricky Bobby, "I'll just bury it deep inside, and never bring it up again." But the line is funny because it's *familiar*—it is precisely what so many people do. When we get even a whiff of any *genuine emotion* rising to the surface in our life, we instinctively stuff it right back down where it came from.

In today's world, we've become really good at this by regularly *numbing* ourselves to our emotion. So anytime something unpleasant rises to the surface in our soul we just head to a bar, or grab a drink or other substance, or open up Tinder. Or, who even needs those things when you've got hundreds of hours of shows on Netflix at your fingertips. "I'm stressed out—I'll just order some food and binge the next season of *Ozark*." Some of us suppress our emotions by *numbing* ourselves to their reality.

There's actually a religious variation of suppression too. **It has become popular to believe in many circles that to be spiritual is to somehow never experience negative emotion at all—to just float about on a cloud of perpetual happiness.** And we'll say things to people things like, "listen to the truth—not your feelings." "Stop being so emotional and just trust God." "It doesn't matter what you *feel*—this is what's true." Now, I think I know what we're *trying* to say there. We're *trying* to say "don't be *ruled* by, *controlled* by your emotions." And that's so important—we're going to talk about that in just a second. But I think in trying to make our case, we're overstating it just a little. **Our emotions are there for a reason, so even if we don't blindly follow them, we'd be better off acknowledging them and doing some work to figure out why they're there, than we would be pretending they aren't there.** Does that make sense?

You see, the problem with suppressing our emotions is that it is—at best—a temporary solution. You can suppress your emotions all you want, but eventually they're going to leak out. Maybe they leak out slowly, where you just gradually become a bitter, resentful, passive-aggressive type of person. Or maybe they leak out suddenly, all at once. You just suppress your emotions for so long that you eventually hit a point where they explode out of you. [Pastor who left his wife after 40 years because he was unhappy]. You have a nervous breakdown, a mid-life crisis—some type of outburst of all the bottled-up desires—that's actually way more harmful than it would've been otherwise. **You can suppress your emotions for a time, but you can't do it forever.** So suppressing your emotions isn't a great approach.

But often as a *reaction* to this approach, people swing the pendulum the *other* way entirely, which leads us to approach #2...

Approach #2: Obey them.

On the other end of the spectrum is the tendency to blindly *obey* our emotions. This one is for my high feelers in the room—I won't make you raise your hands because you would raise them too high and it would get on everybody's nerves. This approach is increasingly popular in the modern West, where we say things to people often like "just listen to your heart." "Well, the heart wants what the heart wants." "Be true to yourself." "You have to do whatever makes you happy." Listen to that language in that last one: "you *have to* do whatever makes you happy." Do you hear how *strong* that language is? That's the language of *obedience*. It's as if our emotions are this demanding overlord and we have no option but to

yield to whatever they tell us to do. These are all ways of saying that we should let our emotions be the final authority in our lives. That whatever we do, we should listen to—and then *obey*—our feelings.

If you subscribe to this philosophy towards your emotions, one of your favorite things to say is “well that’s just how I feel.” As in, “I can’t help myself—that’s just how I feel.” What we’re saying there is that if we feel something, we have *no control* over how we express it. We *have* to obey it. But if you’re a follower of Jesus, that’s actually not the case at all. Here’s what Romans 6 says, speaking to followers of Jesus:

*[12] Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you **obey its passions**. [In other words, you do not have to obey your every whim and emotion and feeling—that is not true of you any longer in Jesus] [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but **present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life...***

So, if you’re a follower of Jesus—if you have been brought from death to life by the saving work of Jesus on the cross—that means that **while your emotions are important, they are not all-important. They are not the final authority in your life.** You no longer *have to* do what they tell you to do. You no longer have to act purely out of “how you feel.” You have a higher purpose than those things.

And honestly, that’s good—because this philosophy towards life leads us nowhere good, and fast. **If you only ever do what your emotions and desires tell you to do in the moment, you are going to wreak havoc on yourself, and on a lot of the people around you.** The man who lashes out at his kids in violence and anger. The wife who has an affair and abandons her husband because she feels more loved by somebody she’s not married to. The person who quits their job on a whim, without any plan to financially sustain themselves afterwards. What each of these people are doing is little more than *obeying* their emotions, and it causes tremendous harm to themselves and others. Our expressive individualism has a nasty dark side to it.

So here’s my point: it would seem that neither *neither* of these two approaches to our emotions are great solutions. So what is the alternative? Well, if we’re looking at Matthew 26, this story from the life of Jesus, it would seem that we should *pray* our emotions. Let’s take a look back at the passage to see this idea at work. So remember, he’s in Gethsemane, he’s overwhelmed with sorrow, he’s overwhelmed emotionally, and then this happens. Let’s read v. 38 again:

*[38] Then he said to them, “**My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.**” [39] And going a little farther he **fell on his face and prayed**, saying, “My Father, **if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.**”*

Okay, before we go any further, *do not* gloss over this. Jesus—God in the flesh—who *from the beginning of time planned with the Father to bring salvation to the world through dying on the cross—that guy*, is feeling the pressure of his imminent death, says to God “if there’s *any other way* to accomplish this, I’d rather do that.” Let that sink in. So, when overcome with sorrow and deep, visceral grief, Jesus does not *suppress* his emotions. He doesn’t. He does not say, “hey guys—I’m a little stressed out—let’s go grab a drink! Let’s forget our sorrows!” Or, “let’s order a pizza and put on some Netflix so I don’t have to think about this whole dying thing.” He doesn’t go SuperChristian on them and go “things are tough right now, but I’m too blessed to be stressed! I will rejoice in the Lord, and *again* I say rejoice!” He doesn’t go stone cold religious on us either. He doesn’t say “Peter, James, John, it doesn’t really matter whether I live or

die—the Lord is sovereign over all things, after all.” He doesn’t *suppress*. He says to his disciples, plainly, “*I’m so overwhelmed right now I feel like I could die.*” And then he goes and falls face-first on the ground in prayer. This is not robotic, this is not Spock-like at all. This is raw, gritty, *unsuppressed*, emotion.

But—also—at the same time, he does not *obey* his emotions either. He doesn’t say “God, I don’t really *feel* like doing this right now, and so I’m not *going* to do this. This is difficult, and this is painful, it doesn’t make me happy, it doesn’t fulfill any of my personal dreams and aspirations, so I’m out.” He doesn’t say to the disciples, “alright guys, I was gonna set into motion this whole death-on-the-cross thing tonight, but tbh, I just don’t really feel like it today, and I just really feel like I should be true to myself in this moment, so we’re gonna call it off.” He does none of that—he is not *mastered* or *controlled* by his emotions. He does not *obey* them. We also know this because he incorporates this iconic line to his prayer, where he says “yet not what I will, but what you will.” So his prayer is “God, here’s *exactly* where I’m at right now, here’s *exactly* what I’d prefer to happen. And at the same time, I will take all of those emotions and I will submit them to you and your plans.”

Jesus has this incredible, *nuanced* approach to his emotions. He doesn’t suppress them, *or* obey them. Instead, he *prays* them. He acknowledges them to God in prayer with *nothing at all held back*—complete honesty—but at the same time, lets that honesty launch him directly into a dialogue with God. So here’s what I want you to see, as far as how this all connects to our series: **there is something about even our most unwanted emotions that launches us into a really honest, really transformative place in our relationship to God. Because it’s precisely in that place that prayer comes *alive*. It’s in that place that prayer stops being a formality and becomes a necessity. It becomes this gritty, honest, powerful place where the real *us* meets the real *God*.**

And I would suggest that biblically, the Psalms lay the groundwork for that to happen. They invite us into this third way of dealing with our emotions: where we aren’t refusing to *acknowledge* them—we’re actually very much acknowledging that they’re there. And on the other hand, we aren’t letting our emotions run our life—we’re not letting them become our master, telling us exactly what we have to do and leading us to make decisions that we regret. Instead, we are taking our emotions and pouring them out to God in prayer, and inviting him into the process of helping us work through them. This, in many ways, is what happens over and over again in the Psalms.

So the Psalms essentially served as a *prayer book* for ancient Israel. So if you remember the prayer booklet we gave out during our last series, that contained examples of prayers for you to pray, the Psalms were very much that—except way longer and way better—for God’s people. They are these beautiful, vivid, honest poems penned by David and several other authors. And their goal to help give us words to pray during all the experiences and emotions that life throws at us. It’s a way of saying, “not only *can* you pray your emotions to God—here are some words that you might find helpful in the process.” The Psalms are 150 chapters of prayers of everything from joy to contempt, and an awful lot of things in between. He gives us this book *chock full* of language to help pray the whole gamut of human emotions to God.

And so in this series, we’re going to do just that. We won’t cover *all* 150 of the Psalms. But we will cover a variety of them. Here’s the types of emotions we plan on covering from the Psalms: anger & contempt, pain & suffering, fear & anxiety, loneliness & isolation, confusion & doubt, and depression & despair. In each week, we’ll work our way through a particular Psalm and a corresponding emotion it contains. We’ll

talk through what that Psalm tells us about that emotion, how to spot it, how to understand it, and lastly, how to helpfully process through it. And **the goal will be to learn not just how to let our emotions out, but how to let them out well.** How to *process* our emotions with God through prayer. So in some ways, this series will kind of be like the prayer series...part 2. We've spent the last five weeks talking about prayer in general, and now we're going to specifically talk about how to pray through the wide range of different experiences and emotions we encounter in life.

And the hope, the desire of this series, is that the Psalms would create this space for us where we can pray *all* our emotions—not just the socially and spiritually acceptable ones, but *all* of them—back to God. Where we can take our most difficult, our most perplexing, and our most frustrating questions about life, and pour them out in prayer. The Psalms are filled, from beginning to end, with language to help us do that. In God's *goodness*, he gave us a book full of prayers to help in the moments when we need it most.

So think about that: our God is a god who *prepares in advance* for his people to be angry at him, confused by him, frustrated by him, disappointed by him, as well as a whole host of other things. And not only is *he* prepared for it, but he prepares *us* for it too—giving us a book full of verbal ammo to hurl at him in those precise moments. So let me ask you: what kind of God does that? What kind of God gives his people resources to direct some of their most severe emotions straight *at* him? Well **here's what kind of God I would submit does that—a God who wants a relationship with his people. A compassionate God. A God who wants his people to run to him in their pain and hurt and not away from him in it. A God who would rather his people be angry and confused inside of a relationship with him than oblivious and numb outside of it.** A God who can handle whatever it is we hurl at him. **And a God who would travel to the cross and back to make that relationship possible.** And he is willing to sit there and take a verbal beatdown from his people if it means a living, breathing relationship with the people he cares about. And if it means he gets to respond by moving, and working, and teaching us, and showing us who he is. And that's part of what the Psalms do for us too.

So let me just ask you this morning: are you willing to take God up on that? Listen, I know there's some real hurt in this room, and no doubt some of it may even seem like it's directly *because of* God himself that it's there. I get that. But would you be willing to try, *taking* that hurt *to* him? Are you willing to learn how to pray it directly *at* him and see what he might do, see what he might *say*, see how he might *work*, in response to that? Because that's what we're going to be doing in this series. And in order to do that, you have to be willing to take the real you to the real God. Not the religious you, not the presentable you, but the *real* you. With all your emotions, with all your baggage, with all your hurt, all your issues. What's on offer is the ability to take all of that stuff, straight to him in prayer.

Somewhere along the line we made prayer into a place to be *good*. Does it ever feel that way to you? We've made prayer into a place to be nice, and pretty, and put-together, and a place to put our perfectly manicured theology on display for God and whoever else happens to hear us praying. We started believing that prayer is a place to be *good*. And prayer *is* a place for God to mold us into his image over time, prayer is a place for us to have wrong ideas about God *reshaped* into right ones. All that is true. But you know what else prayer is a place for? It's a place to be *honest*.³ It's a place to pray what we honestly

³ I owe much of this idea to something I read in a John Ortberg book, but for the life of me can't remember which book it is.

are thinking and feeling directly to God, and to let *that* be the *context* in which he does his molding and shaping. And that's precisely what I'm praying he does for us in this series.

So here's where I want us to close: if you've still got your bibles out, you can go ahead and just close them, put your stuff away, whatever you need to do. And then I'd love it if we could just all close our eyes for just a moment—don't worry, this isn't a cult—we're not going to steal your wallet or anything—but just close your eyes, and I'd love it, if you're willing, to just think of the one emotion that you would say is the most *consistent problem* for you. What is it that you just can't shake? Maybe it's anger or resentment, maybe it's pain and suffering, maybe it's fear and anxiety, maybe it's depression and despair—any variety of other things. But what would you say it is for you? What is the most consistent negative emotion in your life?

And once you know what it is, if you're game for it, here's what I'd love for you to do—with everybody's eyes still closed. If you feel like you can, I'd love for you to just open your hands in front of you symbolically and say these words in your heart—say **“God, I will not hide this from you—I will take it to you.”** “God, I will not hide this from you—I will take it to you.” And maybe saying that feels like *nothing* to you—for others of you, that might be one of the most difficult things you've done in a while. But either way, I'd love it if that just became a resounding cry in our hearts as a church: “God, I will not hide parts of me from you—as if that's even possible. But I will instead, take it *to* you.” God knows. He's already there. He's already there in the midst of your pain, the midst of your confusion and doubt, the midst of your depression and despair, the midst of your anger and frustration—he's there. And so all we're saying with those words is “God, I will not pretend that you aren't there with me in this. And so I will operate as if you are. And as if you *want* to be.” Amen.