

Talking Biblically About Feelings

by John W. Thompson

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We live in a society where the words “I feel” have become the catch phrase of communication. Worse yet, what people feel has become the basis of much of their decision-making. I’m sure you can relate to some of these examples:

“I’ve lost all feelings of love for my husband, so my marriage is now hopeless.”

“I just don’t feel like reading my Bible (going to church, mowing the lawn, etc.), so I won’t do it today.”

“Tell me what you feel, then we’ll really understand each other.”

“Follow your feelings since feelings are the guide to personal fulfillment.”

“How do you feel about me, darling? Do you feel you could be happy with a husband like me?”

The words “I feel” have become the do-all expression, used for anything and everything people may experience, think, or want. But what do people really mean when they say, “I feel this” or “I feel that”? And, more importantly, what does the Bible teach about feelings? To understand the vagueness and even the deceptiveness of our “feelings,” see if you can decipher this paragraph:

“I feel tense when I feel my husband has wronged me. Then I don’t feel like talking to him. Instead, I feel like leaving because I feel he won’t listen anyway. I don’t feel the Bible applies to our conflicts, so I feel justified in the anger I feel.”

Have you ever heard a person talk this way? Do you sometimes talk this way? How about your children? Let’s take a closer look at the way we use the word “feel” and what the Bible says about it. There are four different ways we use the word “feeling,” but not all of them are biblical.

SENSE PERCEPTIONS

First, we use “feeling” to refer to sense perceptions. Cut your finger, and you feel pain. You feel an external, physical event. But you can also feel internal events. For example, “I feel tense” when my muscles knot up and “I feel sick” when my stomach churns. So in its simplest sense, feeling is a synonym for a physical sensation.

The Bible teaches that God made us to experience both physical pain and

physical pleasure. We see this throughout the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 107:1-6). The people of Israel experienced hunger, thirst, fainting, misery and other troubles. God intends such hardships to drive us to Him for help and refuge. Later in this Psalm, we read how Israel experienced satisfied hunger, quenched thirst, safety, and peace. God intends such blessings to stir us unto thankfulness and rejoicing. So God designed us to feel things with our senses, to experience both pain and pleasure. In fact, a promise in Scripture is often an appeal to experience pleasure; and a warning in Scripture is frequently an appeal to avoid pain. Consider the pleasures of food and drink that we are to enjoy with thankfulness, particularly at the marriage supper of the Lamb! And in relation to marriage, Jeremiah 33:11 equates the “voice of joy and gladness” with the “voice of the bridegroom and the bride.” So the Bible teaches that sensory experiences are properly called “feelings.”

OUR EMOTIONS

A second way we use the word “feeling” is to describe emotions. We say, “I feel angry, anxious, lonely, happy, affectionate, fearful, guilty, thankful, excited, ashamed, compassionate, sorrowful, awed, joyful.” These are all God-given emotions. They are signals that register what is happening to you and within you, like the red lights on the dashboard of your car tell you what’s happening under the hood. Your children have these red lights on their dashboard as well! They feel angry, sad, fearful, and joyous. In fact, God is Himself full of emotions like sorrow and joy, anger and tenderness. Since He has created us in His image, we have emotions too.

But the Bible teaches that these emotions can be either justified or unjustified, rightly expressed or wrongly expressed; and they are generally linked with thoughts, attitudes, expectations, words, and deeds. So emotions are not automatically legitimate. They simply register, for good or for ill, what is going on in our relationships with God and neighbor. For example, we say, “Such and such happened, and I’m worried.” That’s a “red light” that I have forgotten the sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness of God who controls all my circumstances. Or we say, “You offended me, so I feel angry.” But when my anger is evaluated by the Word of God, I will in all likelihood find in my response some pride, some comparing, and perhaps some envy. If I am not careful to repent right away, then that anger will be expressed in bitterness, hatred, and even murder (cf. Gen. 4:3-8).

So in Scripture our emotions are properly called “feelings,” but they may be either right or wrong based on whether they are biblically justified and biblically expressed. This is important for you to practice as you live before your children. But it is likewise crucial for you to train your children to deal biblically with their own emotions, evaluating whether their emotions are justified and whether their emotions are properly expressed. This will be vital training for the intense emotions that will come with courtship.

BELIEFS, ATTITUDES, THOUGHTS

A third way we employ the word “feeling” is to describe our beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts. This use begins to move outside the parameters of Scripture. Notice in the above example how the wife said, “I feel that my husband wronged me. I feel he won’t listen. I don’t feel the Bible applies. I feel justified.” What is this wife really saying? She is saying she believes her husband has wronged her. She thinks he won’t listen. She doesn’t believe the Bible applies. And so she thinks she is justified. Though this wife expresses both physical sensation and internal emotion elsewhere in her words, she is here expressing her beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and opinions.

Yet the Bible nowhere uses the word “feeling” in this way. And the problem with allowing ourselves to use “feeling” to express beliefs is that “feelings” are impossible to argue with. People either have them or they don’t. When we express beliefs in terms of feelings, our subjective, inner “truth” replaces the objective “truth” of the Bible. If I “feel” it as an inner conviction, then it becomes inherently true and right. You can surely see the dilemma a father will face with his son or daughter during courtship if his child has been allowed to express beliefs and opinions in terms of “feelings.”

God intends our beliefs and opinions to be carefully evaluated in the light of truth. The Bible has devastating things to say about “leaning on our own understanding” and “being wise in our own eyes.” Is what we believe and think true or false, right or wrong, according to the Bible? It is certainly proper to subjectively feel devotion, enthusiasm, zeal, even passion regarding these objective beliefs about God and His Word. But to use the word “feeling” to articulate those beliefs, thoughts, or opinions is both wrong and dangerous. Instead, we should just say, “I believe this” or “I think that.” Otherwise, we will find ourselves as parents fighting a losing battle with nondescript “feelings” that have been substituted for verifiable beliefs. And these so-called “feelings” will likewise create havoc for our children in their future marriages.

OUR DESIRES

There is a fourth way we use the word “feeling,” and this one, too, is in error. We often use the word “feeling” to express our desires. Notice again the wife’s words: “I don’t feel like talking to him. I feel like leaving.” What is she really saying? She means “I don’t desire to talk to him. Instead, I desire to leave.” Yet by using the word “feel” she has given implicit authority to her impulses, inclinations, desires, yearnings, intentions, and plans. And she has obscured her responsibility to submit her desires to the search light of God’s Word. When expressed as feelings, our deceptive desires will often produce sinful choices.

Now, the Bible teaches that our desires may be perfectly valid: “Honey, I feel like pizza tonight.” Nothing wrong with desiring a pizza for supper, is there? But frequently our desires are of the flesh, which God intends to be overruled by the Spirit. Most of what the world calls “felt needs” are really idolatrous

desires: health and wealth, significance and security, self-esteem and control. God wants them to be exterminated by the Spirit, not indulged by the flesh (cf. Gal. 5:16-18). The Holy Spirit is in the business of changing what you want! Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the heart, or inner man, is composed of "thoughts and intents," i.e., beliefs and desires. It isn't surprising, then, that Satan would confuse our language today with the word "feeling" for both of these categories of the human heart. We call our false beliefs and fleshly desires "feelings" simply because we do not want God interfering with the idolatries of our wayward heart.

These last two uses of the word "feeling" - to mean either our beliefs or our desires - are not biblical uses at all. So use the word "feeling" to express an outward sensation like a pin prick, or an inward emotion like anger or fear. But using the word "feeling" to mean belief or desire should be stricken from our vocabulary and our children's vocabulary, if our beliefs and desires are consistently to be evaluated by God's Word.

The Bible cuts to the very root of a life lived by "feelings." And by His Word, God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12) so that we can (1) resist pleasing self and pursue pleasing Christ, (2) stop being desire-oriented and start being self-disciplined, (3) replace feeling-centered Hollywood Love with self-sacrificial Holy Love, (4) end the me-generation "live for myself" vision of life and begin the multi-generational "sacrifice for my grandchildren" vision of life, and (5) cease deciding by feelings and commence deciding by Scripture.

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