

Obey God or Obey Feelings?

A common theme in our society today is that it is good for a person to follow their feelings. Many people trust their feelings to determine their daily schedule ("I was feeling great so I just kept going"/"I felt down so I spent the evening watching movies"). Others determine how to respond to people based on their feelings ("It felt like we had been friends for years so I told her everything"/"I get an uneasy feeling around him"). Sometimes people even wrongly combine the obeying of feelings with God ("The Lord gave me these feelings for her even though she isn't a believer"/"God wants us all to be happy so I bought the expensive car"/"It didn't seem like God wanted me to forgive her"). Feelings are used to excuse sin ("He made me mad"/"It felt so right so we made love").

What does the Bible say about the place of feelings in our lives? What is the other option? Those are the important questions.

It must be noted that for all the items mentioned above (self control/discipline, communication, loving others, relationships with unbelievers, financial decisions, forgiveness, anger and battling lust/temptation) Scripture gives us written truth on what to do. So in the sample quotes the options are obeying God or obeying feelings. However, there is much more that the Bible says about feelings.

Cain had negative feelings in Genesis 4:5. He "became very angry and his countenance fell." The Lord had had no regard for Cain's offering. God then gives him the counsel needed for him to overcome this difficult time, along with a warning of the destiny of the road he is traveling in verse 7: "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain's decision was clearly to obey God ("do well"), which would result in a restored relationship with God and a lifted countenance, or to continue in his proud anger and downcast outlook, which would result in being mastered by sin. So often these are the options for us and others to whom we minister. Obeying feelings destroyed Cain's life.

Jesus dealt with negative feelings in John 12:27, "My soul has become troubled." He was hours from crucifixion, from becoming sin, from being separated from and punished by the Father (Isaiah 53:3-10). Unlike men, Jesus was holy – so would He follow His feelings and focus on them? No. He said, "What shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name." In the most difficult of times, Jesus showed us how to deal with painful feelings. He focused on obeying God. He thought not about His troubled soul, but about the glory of His Father. He gave us a pattern to follow in hard times.

What about good feelings and positive emotions? According to Scripture, they come as a result of obeying God. Look at the following passages and note the correlation between obedience and the feelings all men seek: John 15:8-11, John 16:33, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, and 1 John 4:19. These pleasant emotions are not the focus or goal, but rather are the by-product of a heart that obeys God.

Many health care professionals believe man is good, so they help people get in touch with their feelings and to follow them. If man was sinless, that might make sense. But man is not pure (1 John 1:8,10). The Bible paints a different picture of man: at best we are sinners saved by grace, who now seek to put off sin and to put on righteousness. Many people in our society like to follow their own feelings. However, Scripture gives us helpful truth on how to deal with negative feelings, as well as what to pursue in life (obeying God). This pursuit, ironically, results in the positive emotions our society seeks to find within.

How important is it to think Biblically and to teach the Word accurately on this issue? It is extremely important. The people we serve hear the message to obey feelings from books, songs, media, movies, schools, and experts. Yet God says otherwise. There are results of obeying feelings and there are certain effects of obeying God instead of feelings. There is a great opportunity to benefit those God has brought into our lives by teaching the practical truth of His Word.