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“Feelings”

Sermon Series: “Getting Past the Past” No.4

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Romans 8:5-16

5 Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. 6 So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. 7 For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will. 8 That’s why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

9 But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) 10 And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. 11 The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

12 Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. 13 For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

15 So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.” 16 For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children.

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We’re in Romans chapter 8 this morning, if you’d care to turn back there with me. Romans chapter 8.

[Lifts Auto Rear-View Mirror]

Getting past your past. Not letting our pasts...dwelling on our pasts dominate or determine our futures.

It’s funny for me to be talking about this today. My brother and sister and I spent half this past week moving my mom out of the house she lived in for 53 years...the house we all grew up in, so this week has been an immersion lesson in the past.

For some of us, myself included, the past is mostly good. Overall, we look at our pasts with affection.

For others of us, our pasts are pretty crummy.

Either way though, time moves on, and it's a fruitless and frustrating and frankly, in some ways, a dangerous thing to try to move forward in life while keeping our eyes and attentions focused on things of the past.

Be they good or bad, we have to move past our past.

That's the theme we've been working with for a few weeks now.

The Bible says we can do it...we need to do it...and that it's possible. But how?

How do we get past our pasts?

We said, first, that it takes intentionality.

Look at the Apostle Paul. When you consider the person he used to be...the things he used to think were important...it's nothing less than miraculous that, when he came to Jesus, all that changed for him.

God did the lion's share of that transformative work in his life, but Paul had to choose the path...Paul had to receive God's mercy and decide that he wanted to be different. That's why he told the Philippian believers to do as he had done and, ***"forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead."***

Now, that ***doesn't*** mean that we ***forget all*** the ***good*** we've ***experienced***...the ***good*** God has ***done***. The ***evidence*** of God's past ***mercy*** and ***help*** is, in many ways, the very thing that empowers us to move ahead.

But ***"forgetting what is behind"*** ***does*** mean that whatever in our past binds us...burdens us...hinders us from walking on with Jesus, we can't let that direct our future steps with Him.

That is the ***"forgetting"*** and ***"straining"*** that Paul talks about, and those are action verbs, aren't they?

God's Spirit will help us...***absolutely***; but ***forgetting*** and ***straining require intentionality*** and ***effort*** from ***us***.

So ***recognizing the importance*** of getting past our past, and seeing that ***we have a working part to play in it***...that's the first step.

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We then affirmed that the whole idea is actually ***realistic***.

You know, Satan works hard to convince us that we are hopelessly ***chained*** to our pasts,

that our pasts will burden us for the rest of our lives,

and that the most we'll ever be able to do is learn to ***manage*** our injuries or learn to cope with what we've experienced.

But friends, God says otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:13

God's record on this lets us know that He wants to do more than just put a band-aid on our wound. God is able to transform people from the inside out.

Now, He doesn't always do it on our timeline or in just the way we ask or expect...but in His perfect way and time, God **does** make people new.

Like 2 Corinthians 5 declares, "***we, in Christ are new creations...the old is gone and the new has come.***"<sup>2</sup>

Paul told the Roman Christians that, "***the old self was crucified with Jesus in order that we can live in newness of life.***"<sup>3</sup>

He tells the church at Colossae that our "***old selves are taken off and a new self put on.***"<sup>4</sup>

Paul could say these things, you see, because it had happened to him.

Few people had more to be proud about, and more to be sorry for, than Paul.

Paul could have been someone totally hung up on himself...on his knowledge, his education, his ability to do miracles, or his capacity to understand the finest details of God and life.

On the other hand, Paul could be could have been someone immobilized by sorrow and fear because of the way he'd persecuted, imprisoned, tortured Christian brothers and sisters in days past.

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All of that was in Paul's rear-view mirror. [*Again, Lifts Auto Rear-View Mirror*]

But Jesus not only **forgave** Paul; Jesus healed Paul from those arrogances and fears, and **remade** Him into a person who helped remake our world!

And what God did for Paul, and for millions of others, He can do for anyone.

Getting past our past is **realistic**.

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Then last week, we looked specifically at getting ***past***...doing away with...***childish tendencies***.

Paul was frustrated by the way some of the Corinthian believers, though physically adults, were still mentally, emotionally and spiritually childish...specifically, by the way, they were constantly elevating themselves and pushing others down.

They were self-preserving, self-exalting and self-centered instead of God-centered, and so they lived in fear instead of in the self-giving, God-centered love that casts our fear.

And that is childish, Paul says, and needs to be put away for good if we're ever to move forward without dwelling on the past.

Paul told the Corinthians,

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>3</sup> Romans 6:6

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:9-10

***“When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things.”***

So Paul called them, and Paul calls Christ-followers today, to receive God’s Spirit and His love...which moves our focus **off** of **us** to **on** to **Him**...to leave behind, **for good**, our childish ways of the past.<sup>5</sup>

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And one of the outworkings of that self-centered childishness, we see in today’s text, is the way that the **feelings** of the childish person directs his or her life.

Now, this is not to say that feelings are in any way wrong or evil. On the contrary, God created us to have feelings. God made us to be emotional people.

Contrary to the ideas of some, Christianity is not a form of stoicism; we are not automatically more holy if we never smile or laugh or feel.

On the contrary, one of the characteristics of life in God’s Spirit is the free flow of all the good that is in human personality. The Spirit frees us to experience and express our emotions in God-pleasing ways.⁶

So emotion is good.

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Connected to this, let’s also affirm that, because of the fall back in Eden, every person struggles in some way. Just as we vary in our talents and gifts, we also vary in our difficulties...in what we struggle with.

So one of the healthiest things any of us can do is to, with the help of the Spirit,  
take a good, honest look at ourselves,  
accept both our gifts and our challenges for what they are,  
and then ask the Lord to do with us all He’d care to do...which includes healing us where we are overly dependent on our feelings.

Now, of course any healing of God is important, but you know...it’s especially important that we ask God to work in our feelings...because feelings really are the most variable and unreliable part of our makeup. Feelings are deep and mysterious and unexplainable and impossible to create at will, right?

I mean, why do we like one person and not another?

Why do we like one sound or taste or color and not another?

Why do we feel great on some days and not so great on others?

Why do even serious Christ-followers experience the occasional spiritual dry spell?

Sometimes we know and sometimes we don’t.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

<sup>6</sup> Seamands, David. Putting Away Childish Things. Victor Books, Wheaton, IL. 1982. P. 103. (Many of the ideas expressed here about feelings come from Seamands.)

Feelings have always been hard to explain.

Among many others, sixteenth-century French theologian, Fenelon, wrote about those “feelingless” periods that sometimes come in our spiritual lives. He offered a list of reasons for them, some that are very spiritual, but the others not at all. One reason, he thought, was because of houseguests that overstay their welcome.

The point is, Christian thinkers have recognized, for centuries, the mystery, the volatility, and the unreliability of feelings, which is why it’s childish for Christ-followers to allow our feelings to control us and to become the thermometer of our spiritual health.

The mature Christian has to get past the childish behavior of taking cues...depending upon mere feelings...in all areas of life, but especially for our sense of identity and well-being in Jesus.

Like Paul wrote to the Romans believers there in verse 5, we can’t let anything or anyone but God’s Spirit control our responses and thoughts, since that’s what leads to the Christ-like life...and to peace.

We can’t let our feelings take the place of God’s Spirit in directing our lives.

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Now, there are many ways we can be tempted to let our feelings control us, but I’ll just mention three that Seamands

The first is depending on the way we *feel* as the basis for our **assurance of salvation**, and I’d bet that more people struggle with this than with any other single thing, spiritually, which is not surprising, since our enemy can make us spiritually impotent if he can knock us off balance here.

Now, again, this is not to say that feelings are never involved in God’s Spirit’s witness to our own spirits that we are His children. At times, we do, absolutely, feel that...and deeply!

But since feelings are so **variable** and **undependable**, we *can’t* make how we may *feel* the **determining factor** of our assurance of salvation.

If we do that, we will be, perpetually, unstable and unhappy.

Our feeling does not lead to fact.

Just the opposite, actually. It’s fact that leads to feeling. That is the divine order.

We see the truth.

We accept the truth.

We enjoy the feeling.

Not the other way around.

The surest way to a life of defeat and instability is to base the security of our relationship with God on how we might feel about it at any given moment. That is a miserable way to live, and, frankly, one of the most certain signs of spiritual immaturity.

A sign of **maturity**, however, is to say, “I know what Jesus did for me and I know that I have asked and received His forgiveness, and so, regardless of how I may feel, I **am, certainly**, God’s child.”

Now, this sort of determination can take some work on our part...especially for those of us who are more feeling-oriented in our personality.

Anna Mow, Church of the Brethren missionary to India, once said that whenever she felt depressed or insecure in her relationship to Christ, she'd prayerfully ask herself three questions:

The first was, "Did I get enough sleep last night?"

Second, "Have I hurt someone, intentionally or not?"

And third, "Do I feel resentment or self-pity?"

If there was something amiss there, she dealt with that, but if all was well in those areas, then she would declare to herself, "All right Anna – you stay here in the blues if you want, but I'm moving on with the Lord!"

You see, we sometimes have to declare...to remind ourselves...that we are not our feelings. We are far more than our feelings.

With the Lord's help, we can, and we must, at times, transcend and command our feelings, especially about the basic assurance of our salvation.

[*Lifts Auto Rear-View Mirror*]

That's how to put that childish practice of the past away for good.

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Another place many people depend on feelings is as their basis for decision-making and, of course, our American "just do what you feel" culture celebrates that.

Now, it's true that God does, at times, lead us through internal feelings and impressions; but we have to be careful that we don't make how we feel the final word about a decision.

Why not?

For at least these two reasons.

First, if we took the time to research it, we'd find that sometimes what we may feel is in total opposition to declared, Scriptural truth. The mature believer recognizes this and does not allow mere feelings to become their directive to act in a sinful way.

Second, the mature believer knows, usually by experience, that at times, God actually asks us to do something that is ***totally contrary*** to how we feel. Often times that is how God ***trains*** and ***tests*** and ***broadens*** us.

Few of us always feel like taking uncomfortable risks or doing things that run against our gifts and comfort zones; but at times that's exactly what God asks of us to strengthen our faith.

But if we allow the way we ***feel*** to be the final word about what we'll ***do***, we never grow up in Him.

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Let me say, too, regarding decision-making...some Christians feel like they have to subject every little decision of life to hours or days of prayer...when the fact is this:

If you have received Jesus as your savior,

if you have surrendered your life to Him as Lord,
if you are studying the objective truth of His word,
if you are honestly open to His Spirit's guidance,

then what you really need to do is *live*.

Live joyfully and self-forgetfully and freely in the trust and assumption that you are living in accord with God and that He will stop you in a clear and real way should you turn from His way.

To stop and expect some certain feeling or impression about every little detail of daily life can actually be detrimental to moving forward with Jesus. It can become your "no-confidence vote" in the Holy Spirit, and, can I say, that can be one of the surest ways to drive yourself, and everyone around you, crazy.

Now, in certain times, like when we're contemplating making a major life decision, we need to remember that guidance comes from several places:

from God's word,
from outer circumstances (like open and closed doors),
from our own best thinking,
from the counsel of other Christians,
and then also from our inward feelings.

God gave us all these to help inform our decisions, and it's childish to depend on just one...but especially on the most unreliable one of them all...feelings.

If we are depending on how we feel as the sole determiner for our decision-making, we need to leave that practice in our past to become spiritually mature.

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And then finally, a third childish way people use feelings is as their motivation for doing good works.

John Wesley preached a message called, "The Nature of Enthusiasm" that dealt with this very thing...on how often we say, "Well, I just didn't feel like doing that. I knew what was right and good and what I needed to do...I knew I needed to help that person or give that money or make worship a priority. I knew I needed to offer that compliment or discipline my kid or tell that truth, but *I just didn't feel like doing it.*"

James 4:17 says,

***"Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for that person that is sin."***

Notice that James did not write, "Whoever knows and feels like doing it."

How often, just like a little kid, we wait on our feelings to be the basis of our motivation. But that is not the Christ-like way.

That is the way of the past...the way of the child...the way that we need to get beyond.

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You know, I'm convinced that there are many, many Christ-followers who are unsettled and unhappy simply because they are entirely, self-centeredly following their *feelings* about doing any good for other people.

They could go a long way toward healing themselves and solving their problems if they would stop sitting around, taking their own spiritual temperature, feeling their own emotional pulse and waiting for some good inner feeling to push them out of themselves. Instead of doing that, they just need to get up, as we're all Scripturally commanded to do, and go and do something good for someone else.

Because the short of it is...to wait to *feel like* doing good before we do it...that's a sin, and there's no quicker way to a life of defeat and uselessness and "poor me" depression than to wait to feel like doing what Scripture simply says Christ-followers are to do.

And that's one reason our culture just *loves* to *exalt feelings*, you see? Because Satan can manipulate us when feelings are allowed to be the last word in our lives, and when that happens, Christians are kept self-absorbed and become, not only *ineffective*, but more often than not, *trouble-makers* in life...and in the church...and in their families.

But God wants so much more than that from us...for us...and for His people!

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God wants us to be *sure of our salvation...all the time*.

God wants us to *make decisions that please Him...at every turn*.

God wants us to *do the good* He designed us to do...*regardless* of how we may *feel* on any given *day* and at any given *time*.

God wants us, with His Spirit's help, to *take command* of our *feelings*...and to live, *not according to* them, but *with* them...and *above* them...and sometimes in *spite* of them.

That's the way of mature faith.

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So...if there's a place in your life that the Spirit is pointing out...where your feelings are really *ruling* your *thoughts*...your *decisions*...what you *do* with your *time* and *gifts*...would you be willing to come that place to the Lord?

That's the simple invitation...would you be willing to just say, "Lord, I don't want to be bound by feelings. I don't want how I may or may not feel to control my life anymore. I want to put that practice...that way of being... in my past and leave it there."

It the Spirit's pointing some place like that out in your life, would you give that to Him? You can come to the altar for that. You can do that in your seat.

Feelings. I've said this a million times: there's nothing magic about this altar. But I'll tell you this: feelings can keep us from coming here when the Spirit wants us to come. And do something publicly and finally with Him.

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**Prayer:** Lord, help us to hear from you clearly and particularly today. You are not a God of generalities. You are a God of particulars. You're very detail oriented. We understand that. We see that in creation, and we see that in ourselves. We see that in how you work in our lives. So, Lord, I pray that if there's a place where our feelings are controlling us...for any one of us...would you take that from us and would you help us to follow you to take command of that place with the help of your Spirit so that we might be the people you've called us to be...that you want us to be...so that we might be the people that do as you ask us to do. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

**Closing Song:** "Jesus I come"

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

The fact is feelings and emotions come to believers from three sources: from God, from the devil, and from our own internal suggestions. And that's exactly why John warns us, ***"not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirit to see whether or not it is of God."***<sup>7</sup>

Don't give in to being controlled merely by feelings.

We are not as Christ followers to be controlled by anything other than the Spirit of God.

Go today, inviting Him and Him alone to take control of us in every way.

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Thanks for coming to worship. The Lord bless and keep you today. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:1