

CHAPTER TWO

THE TOP TEN SYMPTOMS  
OF EMOTIONALLY  
UNHEALTHY SPIRITUALITY



Diagnosing the Problem

Jay, one of our church members, recently shared with me: “I was a Christian for twenty-two years. But instead of being a twenty-two-year-old Christian, I was a one-year-old Christian twenty-two times! I just kept doing the same things over and over and over again.”

Angela, in explaining why she had not attended church for over five years, asked me privately, “Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?”

Ron, the brother of a member of the small group that meets in our home, upon hearing the title of this book, laughed: “Emotionally healthy spirituality? Isn’t that a contradiction?”

Our problem revolves around misapplied biblical truths that not only damage our closest relationships but also obstruct God’s work of profoundly transforming us deep beneath the iceberg of our lives.

THE TOP TEN SYMPTOMS OF  
EMOTIONALLY UNHEALTHY SPIRITUALITY

The pathway for your spiritual life I describe later in this book is radical.

That is, it very likely cuts to the root of your entire approach to following Jesus. Trimming a few branches by, for example, attending a prayer retreat or adding two new spiritual disciplines to an already-crowded life will not be enough. The enormity of the problem is such that only a revolution in our following of Jesus will bring about the lasting, profound change we long for in our lives.

Before I prescribe this pathway, it is essential for us to clearly identify the primary symptoms of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality that continue to wreak havoc in our personal lives and our churches. The following are the top ten symptoms indicating if someone is suffering from a bad case of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality:

1. Using God to run from God
2. Ignoring the emotions of anger, sadness, and fear
3. Dying to the wrong things
4. Denying the past's impact on the present
5. Dividing our lives into "secular" and "sacred" compartments
6. Doing for God instead of being with God
7. Spiritualizing away conflict
8. Covering over brokenness, weakness, and failure
9. Living without limits
10. Judging other people's spiritual journey

### ***1. Using God to Run from God***

Few killer viruses are more difficult to discern than this one. On the surface all appears to be healthy and working, but it's not. All those hours and hours spent lost in one Christian book after another . . . all those many Christian responsibilities outside the home or going from one seminar to another . . . all that extra time in prayer and Bible study. . . . At times we use these Christian activities as an unconscious attempt to escape from pain.

In my case, using God to run from God is when I create a great deal of "God-activity" and ignore difficult areas in my life God wants to change. Some examples:

- When I do God’s work to satisfy me, not him
- When I do things in his name he never asked me to do
- When my prayers are really about God doing my will, not my surrendering to his
- When I demonstrate “Christian behaviors” so significant people think well of me
- When I focus on certain theological points (“Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” [1 Corinthians 14:40]) that are more about my own fears and unresolved issues than concern for God’s truth
- When I use his truth to judge and devalue others
- When I exaggerate my accomplishments for God to subtly compete with others
- When I pronounce, “The Lord told me I should do this” when the truth is, “I *think* the Lord told me to do this”
- When I use Scripture to justify the sinful parts of my family, culture, and nation instead of evaluating them under his Lordship
- When I hide behind God talk, deflecting any spotlight on my inner cracks and becoming defensive about my failures
- When I apply biblical truths selectively when it suits my purposes but avoid situations that would require me to make significant life changes

How about an example? John uses God to validate his strong opinions on issues ranging from the appropriate length of women’s skirts in church to political candidates to gender roles to his inability to negotiate issues with fellow non-Christian managers at work. He does not listen to or check out the innumerable assumptions he makes about others. He quickly jumps to conclusions. His friends, family, and coworkers find him unsafe and condescending.

John then goes on to convince himself he is doing God’s work by misapplying selected verses of Scripture. “Of course that person hates me,” he says to himself. “All those who desire to be godly will suffer persecution.” Ultimately, however, he is using God to run from God.

## 2. Ignoring the Emotions of Anger, Sadness, and Fear

Many of us Christians believe wholeheartedly that anger, sadness, and fear are sins to be avoided, indicating something is wrong with our spiritual life. Anger is dangerous and unloving toward others. Sadness indicates a lack of faith in the promises of God; depression surely reveals a life outside the will of God! And fear? The Bible is filled with commands to “not be anxious about anything” and “do not fear” (see Philippians 4:6 and Isaiah 41:10).

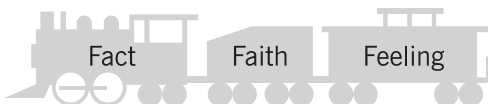
So what do we do? We try to inflate ourselves with a false confidence to make those feelings go away. We quote Scripture, pray Scripture, and memorize Scripture—anything to keep ourselves from being overwhelmed by those feelings!

Like most Christians, I was taught that almost all feelings are unreliable and not to be trusted. They go up and down and are the last thing we should be attending to in our spiritual lives. It is true that some Christians live in the extreme of following their feelings in an unhealthy, unbiblical way. It is more common, however, to encounter Christians who do not believe they have permission to admit their feelings or express them openly. This applies especially to the more “difficult” feelings of fear, sadness, shame, anger, hurt, and pain.

Yet how can I listen to what God is saying to me and evaluate what is going on inside of me when I am so imprisoned?

To feel is to be human. To minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of our personal God. To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well. Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, our feelings are also a component of what it means to be made in the image of God. To cut them out of our spirituality is to slice off a part of our humanity.

To support what I mistakenly believed about God and my feelings I misapplied the famous illustration below<sup>1</sup>:



Used by permission.

The way I thought my spiritual life should head down the tracks began with the engine, where the driver of the train was *fact*—what God said in Scripture. If I felt angry, for example, I needed to start with fact: “What are you angry about, Pete? So this person lied to you and cheated you. God is on the throne. Jesus was lied to and cheated too. So stop the anger.”

After considering the fact of God’s truth, I considered my faith—the issue of my will. Did I choose to place my faith in the fact of God’s Word? Or did I follow my feelings and “fleshly” inclinations, which were not to be trusted?

At the end of the train was the caboose and what was to be trusted least—my feelings. “Under no circumstances, Pete, rely on your feelings. The heart is sinful and desperately wicked. Who can understand it [see Jeremiah 17:9]? This will only lead you astray into sin.”

When taken in its entirety the practical implications of such an imbalanced, narrow, biblical belief system are, as we shall see later, enormous. It leads to a devaluing and repression of the emotional aspect of our humanity that is also made in the image of God. Sadly, some of our Christian beliefs and expectations today have, as Thomas Merton wrote, “merely deadened our humanity, instead of setting it free to develop richly, in all its capacities, under the influence of grace.”<sup>2</sup>

### 3. *Dying to the Wrong Things*

As Iraneus said many centuries ago, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

True, Jesus did say, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). But when we apply this verse rigidly, without qualification from the rest of Scripture, it leads to the very opposite of what God intends. It results in a narrow, faulty theology that says, “The more miserable you are, the more you suffer, the more God loves you. Disregard your unique personhood; it has no place in God’s kingdom.”

We are to die to the sinful parts of who we are—such as defensiveness, detachment from others, arrogance, stubbornness, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, a lack of vulnerability—as well as the more obvious

sins described for us in Scripture: Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Speak the truth (see Exodus 20:13–16 and Ephesians 4:25).

We are not called by God to die to the “good” parts of who we are. God never asked us to die to the healthy desires and pleasures of life—to friendships, joy, art, music, beauty, recreation, laughter, and nature. God plants desires in our hearts so we will nurture and water them. Often these desires and passions are invitations from God, gifts from him. Yet somehow we feel guilty unwrapping those presents.

When I ask people, “Tell me about your wishes, hopes, and dreams,” they are often speechless.

“Why do you ask?” they respond. “Isn’t my only wish, hope, and dream supposed to be to serve Jesus?”

Not exactly. God never asks us to annihilate the self. We are not to become “non-persons” when we become Christians. The very opposite is true. God intends our deeper, truer self, which he created, to blossom freely as we follow him. God has endowed each of us with certain essential qualities that reflect and express him in a unique way. Part of the sanctification process of the Holy Spirit is to strip away the false constructs we have accumulated and enable our true selves to emerge.

#### *4. Denying the Past’s Impact on the Present*

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, whether as a child, teenager, or adult, we are, in the dramatic language of the Bible, born again (see John 3:3). The apostle Paul describes it this way: “The old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

These two verses and their meanings, however, are sometimes misunderstood. Yes, it is true that when we come to Christ, our sins are wiped away and we are given a new name, a new identity, a new future, a new life. It is truly a miracle. We are declared righteous before God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (see Philippians 3:9–10). The eternal, holy God of the universe is no longer our judge but our Father. That is the great news of the gospel.

But we need to understand this does not mean that what our past lives were won’t continue to influence us in different ways. I was under

the illusion for years that because I accepted Jesus, my old life was no longer in me. My past before Christ was painful. I wanted to forget it. I never wanted to look back. Life was so much better now that Jesus was with me.

I thought I was free.

Geri, after nine years of marriage, knew better. I will never forget the first time we made a genogram—a diagram outlining some of the patterns of our families. Our counselor at the time took about an hour to ask probing questions about the interactions between members of both of our families, to write two or three adjectives to describe our parents and their relationships.

When the counselor finished, he simply asked us, “Do you see any similarities between your marriage and your parents’?”

We both sat there dumbfounded.

We were evangelical Christians. We were committed and stable. Our priorities and life choices were very different from that of our parents. Yet, underneath the surface, our marriage bore a striking resemblance to that of our parents’. Gender roles; the handling of anger and conflict and shame; how we defined success; our view of family, children, recreation, pleasure, sexuality, grieving; and our relationships with friends had all been shaped by our families of origin and our cultures.

Sitting in that counselor’s office that day, embarrassed by the state of our marriage, we learned a lesson we would never forget: even though we had been committed Christians for almost twenty years, our ways of relating mirrored much more our family of origin than the way God intended for his new family in Christ.

The work of growing in Christ (what theologians call *sanctification*) does not mean we don’t go back to the past as we press ahead to what God has for us. It actually demands we go back in order to break free from unhealthy and destructive patterns that prevent us from loving ourselves and others as God designed.

### ***5. Dividing Our Lives into “Secular” and “Sacred” Compartments***

Human beings have an uncanny ability to live compartmentalized, double lives.

Frank attends church and sings about God's love. On the way home he pronounces the death penalty over another driver. For Frank Sunday church is for God. Monday to Saturday is for work.

Jane yells at her husband, berating him for his lack of spiritual leadership with the children. He walks away deflated and crushed. She walks away convinced she has fought valiantly in God's name.

Ken has a disciplined devotional time with God each day before going to work, but then does not think of God's presence with him all through the day at work or when he returns home to be with his wife and children.

Judith cries during songs about the love and grace of God at her church. But she regularly complains and blames others for the difficulties and trials in her life.

It is so easy to compartmentalize God to "Christian activities" around church and our spiritual disciplines without thinking of him in our marriages, the disciplining of our children, the spending of our money, our recreation, or even our studying for exams. According to Gallup polls and sociologists, one of the greatest scandals of our day is that "evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered and sexually immoral as the world in general."<sup>3</sup> The statistics are devastating:

- Church members divorce their spouses as often as their secular neighbors.
- Church members beat their wives as often as their neighbors.
- Church members' giving patterns indicate they are almost as materialistic as non-Christians.
- White evangelicals are the most likely people to object to neighbors of another race.
- Of the "higher-commitment" evangelicals, 26 percent think premarital sex is acceptable, while 46 percent of "lower-commitment" evangelicals believe it to be okay also.<sup>4</sup>

Ron Sider, in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, summarizes the level of our compartmentalization: "Whether the issue

is marriage and sexuality or money and care for the poor, evangelicals today are living scandalously unbiblical lives. . . . The data suggest that in many crucial areas evangelicals are not living any differently from their unbelieving neighbors.”<sup>5</sup>

The consequences of this on our witness to Jesus Christ are incalculable, both for ourselves and the world around us. We miss out on the genuine joy of life with Jesus Christ that he promises (see John 15:11). And the watching world shakes its head, incredulous that we can be so blind we can’t see the large gap between our words and our everyday lives.

### ***6. Doing for God Instead of Being with God***

Being productive and getting things done are high priorities in our Western culture. Praying and enjoying God’s presence for no other reason than to delight in him was a luxury, I was told, that we could take pleasure in once we got to heaven. For now, there was too much to be done. People were lost. The world was in deep trouble. And God had entrusted us with the good news of the gospel.

For most of my Christian life I wondered if monks were truly Christian. Their lifestyle seemed escapist. Surely they were not in the will of God. What were they doing to spread the gospel in a world dying without Christ? What about all the sheep who were lost and without direction? Didn’t they know the laborers are few (see Matthew 9:37)?

The messages were clear:

- Doing lots of work for God is a sure sign of a growing spirituality.
- It is all up to you. And you’ll never finish while you’re alive on earth.
- God can’t move unless you pray.
- You are responsible to share Christ around you at all times or people will go to hell.
- Things will fall apart if you don’t persevere and hold things together.

Are all these things wrong? No. But work *for* God that is not nourished by a deep interior life *with* God will eventually be contaminated by other things such as ego, power, needing approval of and from others, and buying into the wrong ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we can't fail. When we work for God because of these things, our experience of the gospel often falls off center. We become "human doings" not "human beings." Our experiential sense of worth and validation gradually shifts from God's unconditional love for us in Christ to our works and performance. The joy of Christ gradually disappears.

Our activity for God can only properly flow from a life *with* God. We cannot give what we do not possess. Doing for God in a way that is proportionate to our being with God is the only pathway to a pure heart and seeing God (see Matthew 5:8).

### **7. *Spiritualizing Away Conflict***

Nobody likes conflict. Yet conflict is everywhere—from law courts to workplaces to classrooms to neighborhoods to marriages to parenting our children to close friendships to when someone has spoken or acted toward you inappropriately. But the belief that smoothing over disagreements or "sweeping them under the rug" is to follow Jesus continues to be one of the most destructive myths alive in the church today. For this reason, churches, small groups, ministry teams, denominations, and communities continue to experience the pain of unresolved conflicts.

Very, very few of us come from families where conflicts are resolved in a mature, healthy way. Most simply bury our tensions and move on. In my own family, when I became a Christian I was the great "peacemaker." I would do anything to keep unity and love flowing in the church as well as my marriage and family. I saw conflict as something that had to be fixed as quickly as possible. Like radioactive waste from a nuclear power plant, if not contained, I feared it might unleash terrible damage.

So I did what most Christians do: I lied a lot, both to myself and others.

What do you do when faced with the tension and mess of disagreements? Some of us may be guilty of one or more of the following:

- Say one thing to people’s faces and then another behind their backs
- Make promises we have no intention of keeping
- Blame
- Attack
- Give people the silent treatment
- Become sarcastic
- Give in because we are afraid of not being liked
- “Leak” our anger by sending an e-mail containing a not-so-subtle criticism
- Tell only half the truth because we can’t bear to hurt a friend’s feelings
- Say yes when we mean no
- Avoid and withdraw and cut off
- Find an outside person with whom we can share in order to ease our anxiety

Jesus shows us that healthy Christians do not avoid conflict. His life was filled with it! He was in regular conflict with the religious leaders, the crowds, the disciples—even his own family. Out of a desire to bring true peace, Jesus disrupted the false peace all around him. He refused to “spiritualize away” conflict.

### ***8. Covering Over Brokenness, Weakness, and Failure***

The pressure to present an image of ourselves as strong and spiritually “together” hovers over most of us. We feel guilty for not measuring up, for not making the grade. We forget that not one of us is perfect and that we are all sinners. We forget that David, one of God’s most beloved friends, committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband. Talk about a scandal! How many of us would not have erased that from the history books forever lest the name of God be disgraced?

David did not. Instead he used his absolute power as king to ensure the details of his colossal failure were published in the history books for all future generations! In fact, David wrote a song about his failure to be sung in Israel’s worship services and to be published in their wor-

ship manual, the psalms. (Hopefully he asked Bathsheba's permission first!) David knew "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Another of God's great men, the apostle Paul, wrote about God not answering his prayers and about his "thorn in [the] flesh." He thanked God for his brokenness, reminding his readers that Christ's power "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). How many Christians do you know who would do such a thing today?

The Bible does not spin the flaws and weaknesses of its heroes. Moses was a murderer. Hosea's wife was a prostitute. Peter rebuked God! Noah got drunk. Jonah was a racist. Jacob was a liar. John Mark deserted Paul. Elijah burned out. Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal. Thomas doubted. Moses had a temper. Timothy had ulcers. And all these people send the same message: that every human being on earth, regardless of their gifts and strengths, is weak, vulnerable, and dependent on God and others.

For years I would observe unusually gifted people perform in extraordinary ways—whether in the arts, sports, leadership, politics, business, academics, parenting, or church—and wonder if somehow they were not as broken as the rest of us. Now I know they weren't. We are all deeply flawed and broken. There are no exceptions.

### *9. Living Without Limits*

I was taught that good Christians constantly give and tend to others. I wasn't supposed to say no to opportunities to or requests for help because that would be selfish.

Some Christians are selfish. They believe in God and Jesus Christ, but live their lives as if God doesn't exist. They don't think or care about loving and serving others outside of their families and friends. That is a tragedy.

I meet many more Christians, however, who carry around guilt for never doing enough. "Pete, I spent two hours on the phone listening to him and it still wasn't enough," a friend recently complained to me. "It makes me want to run away."

This guilt often leads to discouragement. And this discouragement

often leads Christians to disengagement and isolation from “needy people” because they don’t know what else to do.

The core spiritual issue here relates to our limits and our humanity. We are not God. We cannot serve everyone in need. We are human. When Paul said, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13), the context was that of learning to be content in all circumstances. The strength he received from Christ was not the strength to change, deny, or defy his circumstances; it was the strength to be content in the midst of them, to surrender to God’s loving will for him (see Philippians 4:11–13).

Jesus modeled this for us as a human being—fully God yet fully human. He did not heal every sick person in Palestine. He did not raise every dead person. He did not feed all the hungry beggars or set up job development centers for the poor of Jerusalem.

He didn’t do it, and we shouldn’t feel we have to. But somehow we do. Why don’t we take appropriate care of ourselves? Why are so many Christians, along with the rest of our culture, frantic, exhausted, overloaded, and hurried?

Few Christians make the connection between love of self and love of others. Sadly, many believe that taking care of themselves is a sin, a “psychologizing” of the gospel taken from our self-centered culture. I believed that myself for years.

It is true we are called to consider others more important than ourselves (see Philippians 2:3). We are called to lay down our lives for others (see 1 John 3:16). But remember, you first need a “self” to lay down.

As Parker Palmer said, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”<sup>6</sup>

### *10. Judging Other People’s Spiritual Journey*

“The monk,” said one of the Desert Fathers, “must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all in any way whatever.” He continued: “If you

are occupied with your own faults, you have no time to see those of your neighbor.”<sup>7</sup>

I was taught it was my responsibility to correct people in error or in sin and to always counsel people who were mixed up spiritually. I therefore felt guilty if I saw something questionable and did nothing to point it out. But I felt even guiltier when I was supposed to fix someone’s problem and had to admit “I don’t know how” or “I don’t know what to say.” Wasn’t I commanded to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in me (see 1 Peter 3:15)?

Of course, many of us have no trouble at all dispensing advice or pointing out wrongdoing. We spend so much time at it that we end up self-deceived, thinking we have much to give and therefore little to receive from others. After all, we’re the ones who are right, aren’t we? This often leads to an inability to receive from ordinary, less mature people than ourselves. We only receive from experts or professionals.

This has always been one of the greatest dangers in Christianity. It becomes “us versus them.” In Jesus’ day there was the superior “in group” of Pharisees who obeyed God’s commands. And there was the inferior “out group” of sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

Sadly, we often turn our differences into moral superiority or virtues. I see it all the time. We judge people for their music (too soft or too loud) and the length of their hair (too short or too long). We judge them for dressing up or dressing down, for the movies they watch and the cars they buy. We create never-ending groups to subtly categorize people:

- “Those artists and musicians. They are so flakey.”
- “Those engineers. They are so cerebral. They’re cold as fish.”
- “Men are idiots. They’re socially infantile.”
- “Women are overly sensitive and emotional.”
- “The rich are self-indulgent and selfish.”
- “The poor are lazy.”

We judge the Presbyterians for being too structured. We judge the Pentecostals for lacking structure. We judge Episcopalians for their can-

dles and their written prayers. We judge Roman Catholics for their view of the Lord's Supper and Orthodox Christians from the Eastern part of the world for their strange culture and love for icons.

By failing to let others be themselves before God and move at their own pace, we inevitably project onto them our own discomfort with their choice to live life differently than we do. We end up eliminating them in our minds, trying to make others like us, abandoning them altogether or falling into a "Who cares?" indifference toward them. In some ways the silence of unconcern can be more deadly than hate.

Like Jesus said, unless I first take the log out of my own eye, knowing that I have huge blind spots, I am dangerous. I must see the extensive damage sin has done to every part of who I am—emotion, intellect, body, will, and spirit—before I can attempt to remove the speck from my brother's eye (see Matthew 7:1–5).

### THE REVOLUTIONARY ANTIDOTE

The pathway to unleashing the transformative power of Jesus to heal our spiritual lives can be found in the joining of emotional health and contemplative spirituality. In the next chapter I will explain what they are and why they both must be integrated into our discipleship with Christ.



*Lord, when I consider this chapter, the only thing I can say is, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." Thank you, O God, that I stand before you in the righteousness of Jesus, in his perfect record and performance, not my own. Lord, I ask that you would not simply heal the symptoms of what is not right in my life, but that you would surgically remove all that is in me that does not belong to you. As I think about what I have read, Lord, pour light over the things that are hidden. May I see clearly as you hold me tenderly. In Jesus' name, amen.*