

DEALING WITH

OUR BAGGAGE



INTRODUCTION

Family systems theory suggests that individuals can't be understood in isolation from one another. We are truly known only in the context of our upbringing. The atmosphere of our homes explains a lot about who we are. For many, the home was unsafe. Without a strong, loving, engaged father figure, a toxic atmosphere of conditional love can be created, and the shadow that our parents cast upon our lives can actually erode confidence, hope and the ability to give and receive love. Unhealthy family systems are why many of us have compulsions, addictions and destructive habits, as well as more subtle issues like people pleasing, perfectionism or whether or not an individual has the amount of drive needed to succeed.

David is known in scripture as the man after God's own heart; he loved God passionately, yet in a season of spiritual drifting, consumed by lust he impregnated another man's wife, a woman named Bathsheba. Then, to cover this up, he essentially murdered the husband under the guise of war. As the scandal was unearthed, David's grown-up sons struggled with all kinds of pent up resentment toward what their dad had done to their family. They struggled with the very sins of their father. Consequently, David's daughter, Tamar, is raped by her half-brother Amnon because he can't control his lust. Then his son Amnon is murdered by another son, Absalom, to avenge Tamar. Absalom, despising his father perhaps for his poor leadership and bad example tries to overtake the kingdom from David, attempting to kill his own father, and then ends up being killed himself. Another son, Adonijah, also attempted to do the same and was killed. The Biblical example of a broken family system and its caustic effects on the children is powerful.

Our past affects who we are. It produces baggage, stuff we need to walk through life carrying. Baggage could be defined as the residual effects of the painful experiences of life, whether we were violated, abused or neglected, whether it was what others did to us or what we ourselves did, or whether it was just our home environment. Growing up in a negative atmosphere can be a bit like breathing polluted air. All of this from our past creates baggage and like a drum of chemicals buried in the earth, over time it can seep into every area of our lives, our identity, our emotions, our thoughts, our relationships, our view of God; every part of our lives.

- *How would you define baggage in your own words?*
- *What do you think of the David story of a broken family system?*

This study is all about becoming WHOLE or at least beginning to heal and make progress in our “stuff”. Some of the baggage that we carry can be dropped while other parts we may carry for the rest of our lives, but as we learn our story and walk a path of recovery from our wounding, God can bring redemption to our scars. Some this may include counseling, for others it may not. This study will begin with recognizing our baggage, then the importance of a healing community, the lies we believe, and Rational Christian Thinking.

PART 1: RECOGNIZING OUR BAGGAGE

Our Past affects who we are.

My upbringing (John) shaped me into being emotionally stuffed, intimacy and conflict avoidant, with a tendency toward being controlling and toward depression.

Our wounding effects our emotions.

Our upbringing can produce feelings of shame & worthlessness, inadequacy, depression, self-hatred, fear, insecurity, anger and rage.

Our wounding affects our thoughts.

Our upbringing can produce thoughts of perfectionism, thoughts of needing everyone's approval, the mentality that I deserve to be punished, that I am inferior. It can produce “mental tapes” where these messages (i.e., you're not cutting it”) are replayed over and over again.



Our wounding affects our view of God.

Our upbringing can produce fears like “God is not safe” or “God is out to get me” or “God can’t be trusted”. These are not things that we have thought through and decided upon, things that we have developed as convictions, but rather, these core beliefs that were developed within us. In our upbringing and apart from our approval, these beliefs were poured like wet concrete into our souls. As we grew and life seemed to support what we already believed, these solidified into the hard concrete of a firm conviction, a core belief.

Our wounding affects our defenses.

Once we’ve been hurt, we begin to build up strong defenses against anyone ever hurting us again. These defense mechanisms can be powerful and people severely wounded often have numerous defenses. These defenses prevent us from hearing what we need to hear to grow and to love.

Our wounding affects our relationships.

Being so depleted or relationally malnourished, our drive to get love at all costs can cause us to selfishly ignore how we are using or hurting others. As one man said, “I never thought about who I was hurting.” It can also affect our relationship with God in the same way; desperate to get what we think will provide “life” for us, our integrity can crumble and our relationship to God damaged.

Some of us know that we have baggage, and some of us don’t. What often happens is that we go away to college, hear someone talk about their family and then realize, “Whoa. My family is not like that at all.”

Our baggage comes in all shapes and sizes; it’s different for everyone. Some of us have small, little bags that we carry which don’t really affect us all that much. Others have larger bags or even suitcases or worse yet, U-Haul trailers and 18-foot moving trucks filled to the top.

- *What effect of wounding can you recognize in yourself?*
- *Would you regard yourself as having a small amount of baggage or a larger amount of baggage?*
- *What questions do you have about what we’ve discussed so far?*

PART 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALING COMMUNITY

To become aware of our wounds and to begin to heal our wounds, we must be in a “safe” community. A safe community is:

- One that is not self-righteous. Its members being aware of their own brokenness
- One that honors a person’s struggle enough to take an interest in their story
- One that redemptively listens, caring and asking safe questions to draw out the heart

- One that models and invites people to be open and transparent with their struggles
- One that refuses to judge and condemn people just because they have struggles
- One that is able to express unconditional love despite a person's struggles

- *After reading this description, how safe of a community do you think we are? If you were to suggest a way for us to improve, which area would you say?*
- *If we are not safe, what affect would that have our development of community? Of our ability to heal?*
- *In what ways do you think you are or are not a safe person personally?*

According to Greek mythology, Achilles was the bravest hero in the Trojan War, but he did have one weak spot. When Achilles was born, his mother tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. As she immersed him, she held him by one heel and forgot to dip him a second time so the heel she held could get wet too. Therefore, the place where she held him remained untouched by the magical water of the Styx and that part stayed mortal or vulnerable. Achilles fought heroically against the Trojans, but was killed by Paris the Prince (played by Orlando Bloom if you need the reminder), who shot him with an arrow in the heel. To this day, any weak point in a person's character is called an "Achilles heel." Scripture tells us what to do with our Achilles heel, our manifesting of wounding.

"Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."

~ Hebrews 12:12-13



What is startling about the above image is that the runner to the right is blind, yet he is able to sprint because he's being led by his friend. How does this image capture part of the importance of healthy community to our own healing and recovery from our baggage?

Practical steps to address our areas of wounding:

(1) Leave the Darkness and Come into the Light.

Coming into the light is taking the risk to share that which we're tempted to keep hidden. The problem is simply this: we all long for unconditional love acceptance, but you can't experience love and acceptance in something that is hidden. It is only by bringing that area into the light that we can feel acceptance and the power of our shame be diminished.

*“Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets.”
~ Paul Tournier*

(2) Let others reorient you to dignity and acceptance by receiving the love that they give through genuine listening.

*“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person,
they are almost indistinguishable.”
~ David Augsberger*

(3) Build Redemptive Relationships for encouragement and accountability.

It's almost impossible to do this journey alone; a redemptive relationship is one where not only listening, but teaching, parenting and even correction can take place.

(4) Sit in the forgiveness of Christ, and live it out to others.

(5) Embrace your story as a way of helping others.

(6) Consider counseling as a way of getting the help you need.

(7) Renew your mind with the Truth of God.

- *As you consider your own life, which of the previous seven steps resonate with you the most?*
- *Which do you think would be the most difficult for you?*
- *Does anyone want to venture specifically into step 1?*

PART 3: THE LIES WE BELIEVE

In this part, we want to look at four common lies that we struggle with to gain more insight about what we struggle with personally and to just consider the “identity-makers”, spiritual truths, that can bring healing to us.

Lie #1: I can only feel good about myself when people approve of me.

People live under the bondage of needing others’ approval frequently due to a care-giver who seemed to be perpetually disappointed in them. This need for approval can lead to struggling with your self-image and to feeling like God isn’t pleased with you. You think that no matter how hard you try, it’s never good enough in His eyes. Spiritually, you feel like if you get C’s on your report card, God wants B’s. If you get B’s, God wants A’s. If you get A’s, God wants straight A’s and A+’s. Some of us place unreasonable demands on our lives that we could never possibly live up to because of this lie.

Identity-Maker #1: The most significant person in the universe DOES approve of me!

“For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”

~ Romans 5:10

Lie #2: I can only feel good about myself when I live up to certain standards.

This is very closely related to the first lie and can lead to perfectionism, depression and being highly critical of oneself. Many Christians think that they intellectually believe what the Bible teaches about them, but how you THINK, how you FEEL, and WHAT YOU ATTEMPT for God are the truest indicators of what you believe! If we feel like we need to measure up to certain standards, we’ve not grasped the love and acceptance that God has shown for us through Christ. We cannot simply tell ourselves to feel a certain way. However, over time, we can grow in discerning when we are believing this lie, and learn to replace it with God’s truth.

Identity-Maker #2: The standard has been met by Christ, and I have nothing left to prove!

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

~ Romans 5:1

Lie #3: God is disappointed with my performance.

“Guilt was not my problem as I felt it. What I felt most was a glob of unworthiness that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of. What I needed more than pardon was a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me, and would never let go of me even if he was not too impressed with what he had on his hands.”

~ Lewis Smedes

Many Christians act, think and feel as if God is perpetually disappointed with them and they need to please Him by working and performing harder in their spiritual lives. They think, "If only I were _____, God would love me more." When we develop a performance mentality, we become stuck like a hamster on a wheel spinning around, getting nowhere, and trying to earn God's love that He freely gives us. Many believers start out at salvation, knowing that God is pleased with them, having done nothing for Christ yet, but after following Christ for some time they begin to feel that He isn't pleased with them. Going back to trying to earn God's love is forgetting His perfect acceptance of you. God's grace is so different than what most of us have experienced, we will instinctively go back to thinking that God is different than the way the Bible reveals Him.

Identity-Maker #3: God relates to us as His children in whom He's pleased.

"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'"
~ Romans 8:15

Every man-made religion in the world presumes that there is something that we can do to measure up to God's expectations. The gospel, in contrast, teaches us to live as God's very own children.

- **A servant is appreciated on the basis of what he does. A child is appreciated on the basis of who he is.**
- **A servant starts the day anxious about whether or not his work will please his master. A child rests in the secure love of a dad who is pleased.**
- **A servant is accepted because of his workmanship, but a child is accepted because of his relationship.**

The lie is that God is disappointed with your performance. The truth is God relates to you as His son/daughter in whom He's pleased. You have to grow in replacing the lie with THIS truth!

Lie #4: You are nothing but a wicked sinner saved by grace.

A common lie within the church is misapplying the biblical teaching comparing our unredeemed past and our newly redeemed heart. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and is desperately sick." The message we hear is, "You really are a sinner, a depraved wretch...pond scum, really." A huge misconception in the church today is that we are merely forgiven sinners! Is that what the good news about Jesus means? That we are forgiven, but left with an unchanged heart? No. When we came to Christ, God not only forgave us, but He made our hearts new. To have a sinful nature, yet be forgiven would actually be horrible, very bad news, leading you to constantly feel like you could not do what God has commanded. We need to believe the truth about our new hearts. When a person becomes a believer, God replaces their naturally selfish and wicked heart with one that desires to love and please Him.

Identity-Maker #4: Our new hearts are good and long to do what is right.

“and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth”

~ Ephesians 4:24

One of the most helpful things to your identity as a believer is to embrace the reality that you have a new self, a heart that has been recreated by God, that your desires can now actually be righteous and holy.

The lie is that you are nothing but a wicked sinner saved by grace. The truth is, your new heart is good, and you do long to do what is right. You have to grow in replacing the lie with THIS truth!

PART 4: RATIONAL CHRISTIAN THINKING

Rational Christian thinking is a process with many steps. They are recognizing our emotional dissonance, discerning the core belief that is driving our emotions, embracing the truth that scripture declares in the power of the Holy Spirit. Rational Christian Thinking is needed when we have some emotional response that doesn't fit the situation. For example:

A -There is an Activating Event (someone accused me of stealing)

That resulted in:

C- A Defensive Reaction - (I blew up at my boss and am on probation now). I was defensive because that emotional response is designed to alleviate the negative emotion I'm experiencing, so it may be protective (withdrawal, hardening of the heart) or offensive (blaming, denying and attacking).

In between the A and C is B, which are our beliefs (if I'm attacked, it's up to me to fight back because no one else will).

When we take note of C, our defensive or overly emotional response (I got angry really fast), something is going on in B. By being open about what we're feeling, we can explore B, our beliefs, in community.

RCT enables us to notice the strong emotional component and trace back to the underlying belief system looking for lies that can be addressed. What I experienced in my upbringing was this: my brother accused me of something he did and my parents believed him, so I was the one to receive punishment. Clearly, it's up to me to fight back.

As a child, sometimes lashing out helped my parents hear my side of the story, but as an adult that

defensive anger is tied to a belief that isn't accurate any more. In the work place there is likely some appeals process and keeping my temper will likely serve me more than losing it.

We can break down Rational Christian Thinking even more:

1. Recognizing our emotional dissonance

Our feelings cannot lead our lives. As Erwin W. Lutzer has written, "A Christian life based on feeling is headed for a gigantic collapse." We may not feel God's closeness, nor feel His goodness, nor feel His wisdom as we look at our present circumstances, yet God is not our feelings. We must learn how to let the truth, defined by scripture, rule our feelings, and not let our feelings rule our understanding of truth. With that said, many people have never been taught to even recognize their emotions or experience them. Jesus, as the perfect man, fully expressed a wide range of emotions. He wept. He grieved. He experienced anger. Jesus was perfectly comfortable, if you will, with the frailties of being human, but some of us are the opposite! We think that anger or sadness isn't spiritual, or we've been taught to simply dismiss our emotions so we can live by faith.

Discover your Emotions as Messengers of the Soul

"Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality; listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God...Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice...However, we often turn a deaf ear-through emotional denial, distortion, or disengagement. We strain out everything disturbing in order to gain tenuous control of our inner world. We are frightened and ashamed of what leaks into our consciousness. In neglecting our intense emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God. We forget that change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God."

~ Dan Allendar

Stuffing our emotions to live by faith is to live inauthentically.

Living life in response to whatever emotions I feel, without discerning what beliefs are driving those emotions is to live in slavery.

Rational Christian Thinking seeks to help us connect our emotional responses to our underlying beliefs.



Our emotions tell us what is really going on in the core of our beings. Emotional dissonance is when our feelings are disproportionate to our circumstances.

Just as a few examples, we need to be able to recognize:

"I'm way angrier than I ought to be..."

"My sadness is way deeper than it ought to be right now..."

"The loneliness I feel has been overwhelming ever since I got that phone call..."

"I'm significantly more anxious than the circumstances warrant..."

"I feel huge amounts of shame that is disproportionate to the little bit of embarrassment anyone would feel if they failed like I just did..."

"The sadness that I feel about a recent loss is taking me to places of despair and depression that is significantly beyond the level of loss I have experienced recently..."

"I'm feeling way more defensive about something I was just accused of and the situation warrants..."

Someone doesn't notice all the hard work we put into a specific project – and we blow up at them or go away and sulk for a long period of time, until they come find us and placate our hearts until we feel better.

2. Discerning the core belief driving our emotion

Our emotions are like a messenger from the front lines of life back to central command- "here's what is going on out there." Our emotions can reveal to us what we really believe. Some of us live constantly bombarded with thoughts that are destructive to our lives, but they are so FAMILIAR to us WE GET USED TO THEM. We return again and again to abuse ourselves with destructive thoughts and with the negative emotions which they produce, feelings of shame, self-hatred, fear, anger and false guilt.

We already discussed these 4 big lies:

Lie #1: I can feel good about myself only when people approve of me.

Lie #2: I can feel good about myself only when I live up to certain standards.

Lie #3: God is disappointed with my performance.

Lie #4: You are nothing but a wicked sinner saved by grace.

To this list, let's add a few more:

I'm not lovable.

I am not safe.

I am powerless.

I cannot trust myself.

I cannot trust anybody else.

I am not good enough.

God isn't safe.

God is aloof, uncaring.

God is disappointed in me.

God does not love me.

I'm dispensable.



Discerning the core belief is prayerfully considering your emotional dissonance with the “activating event”, the thing that caused the emotional reaction within us. An example:

Husband comes home from work and opens the pantry door to throw away something and find the trashcan not there. He feels angry and irritated and lashes out. He discovers upon reflection that his wife moving the trashcan from the pantry to under the sink. This triggered anger in him because he felt disrespected by her. His underlying belief system is that “a man’s home is his castle” and his dad always got things the way he wanted them so he should too. Upon talking with his wife he discovered that she believes trash in the food pantry is unhealthy, and her family always kept trash under the sink to separate it from fresh food. His emotional response here certainly got in the way of loving his wife and even perhaps helping protect his family from unsanitary circumstances.

3: Embracing God’s truth in the power of the Holy Spirit

Rational Christian thinking, more than any other thing, is simply thinking Biblically. It is taking our thoughts captive, rather than letting them run away with us.

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

~ 2 Corinthians 10:5

More than that, it is learning to filter our thoughts, that is, to look at our thoughts and see if they are Biblical, if they are grounded in truth. Scripture tells us what kind of thoughts should be dwelt upon.

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

~ Philippians 4:8

Embracing God’s truth in the power of the Holy Spirit is seeking to best understand our underlying belief system by exploring our emotional responses. It is taking our feelings-- “I am powerless”, and seeking to examine them in light of God’s truth. “There are things that are beyond my power, but I do have many choices in life, and I can trust in God’s power when I feel powerless.”

- *Please only share things about yourself that you feel you can safely share with this group at this time.*
- *We asked this earlier, but now having completed this study, what baggage do you think you have?*
- *Where do you think it came from?*
- *What effect do these areas have on your relationships? With God? With others?*
- *What prevents you from coming into the light with these issues?*
- *If there was one area of life that you tend most to be overly sensitive in – what area would that be?*
- *If there was one area you could change that would help you the most in your relationships with other people, what area would that be?*

ACTION POINTS

1. Jeremiah 17:14 is a good addition to our prayers: “heal me oh Lord and I will be healed. Save me, and I will be saved.”
2. On your own review what spoke to you the most about this study; what is a way forward for you in light of this study?