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Is There Something I Can Do to Develop Love for Christ if I Am Emotionally Detached?

March 14, 2024



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether there is something a person can do to develop love for Christ if they are emotionally detached and whether one should stay in a church that is slowly drifting away from historic Christianity.

* How is a person supposed to love Christ if they are emotionally detached? Is there a way to do something about it?

* Should I stay in a church that is slowly drifting away from historic Christianity and seems to question basic beliefs such as the authority of the Old Testament, Heaven, Hell, evangelism, etc.?

Transcript

You're listening to the hashtag SDRask Podcast. I'm Amy Hall and with me today and every day is Greg Koukl. Hey.

Every day on the show that is not every day of our lives. Once a week, but it's a high point for me to work together with the one, the only, the great. Right.

Amos Hall. All right. Let's start with a question from Jack.

Hello, I can't force myself to love a potential friend, a particular woman, et cetera. How is a person supposed to love Christ if they are emotionally detached? Surely, there has to be some way for those emotionally detached to do something about it if you are not a determinist. Well, this is a really important question, and it's actually one that's close to my heart because it's an issue that I've struggled with over the years and have talked to God a lot about.

There are a number of things that are going on here. First thing you have to understand is loving Christ is not necessarily an emotion. And this is where there's a lot of confusion.

Love is characterized by action, and action precedes the emotional response oftentimes, but not consistently. So this is where, look at for millennia, most human beings have had arranged marriages. So there was no emotional thing that was going on in most of those cases.

And this is why it troubles me when I saw a documentary yesterday about Mary. It was a short little clip about Bethlehem and Mary, and she said, how can I marry a guy I don't even know? How can I marry someone I don't love? Well, that's the 20th century question. That's not a first century question.

Okay. The understanding is, and I've been taught to them, people who have had arranged, is that you don't start with the pot boiling, the pot boils as you develop your relationship. And so the love follows action, not it's not to the other way around.

I have a lot more I could say about this, but let me just simply say that emotions follow actions. You act the right way and emotions follow. That's good psychology.

That's the way things work for human beings. This is why we are told to love in action in the New Testament, to be virtuous, do this, do this, do this, do this, do this, okay. And the feelings follow that maybe, but even when they don't, it doesn't mean that your actions are not loving.

If you are to love others as you love yourself, see, as Liz has pointed out, we don't always have positive feelings about ourselves, warm emotions about ourselves. But we do look after our own self-interest, that we do too. That's the way we're supposed to love others.

And some people got it in their head, well, I don't love myself enough right now. So I don't have to worry about other people until I feel good about myself. And then once I feel good about myself, I can love others.

This is totally upside down biblically, okay. And even Aristotle got this right, 400 years before Christ, that virtue is developed by actions. You do the actions and then the virtues become enjoyable for their own sake.

And so love is not, the biblical love is not principally an emotion, it's an action. For God so loved the world that He gave, notice that the characterization of love in John 3 16 is God's action towards your value speaking. Right.

He loved them this much, but this is how He loved them. Yeah, this is the way in which He loved. And in fact, the word world there is cosmos.

It's not just referring to individual people. Now that's not to undermine anything about the love of God. It's expressed a lot in other places, but even no greater love has been than this, that his heart is always filled with emotion.

That isn't the way the verse goes, that he lay down his life for his friend, okay. So the biblical love is an virtuous action towards others. It is not an emotion.

Now, I mean, it can be emotion. There's emotions that are involved and sometimes emotions are expressed. We see that in the Song of Solomon, you know, and other places.

But nevertheless, if that's what you think to be a good, solid Christian, you have to conjure up a certain feeling. You are going to guarantee defeat. And again, speaking from my own life, I'm very effective and emotional under a number of circumstances, especially with people I care about and especially family members, okay.

And I can get emotional, I can tear up, I can cry at movies, but my emotional interaction with God is much less than I want it, okay. And that's been the case for 50 years and I have had to work to develop it. And over times, that has happened.

The closer I get, the more I give myself to God, the more time I spend with him, the time I open my heart to the Father as Jesus has indicated to us in the Lord's prayer, the more connectedness I feel with God, but it's taken a long time to do that. I have virtually no connectedness to Jesus, which has frustrated me. And again, this has been a subject of prayer.

And I said, Jesus, you told me to talk to the Father. And so I've been working on that for years and that has really helped my affective element, my feelings regarding God, but it hasn't helped my feelings regarding Jesus. So I'm praying about that to have a stronger love, emotional love for Jesus, because emotional love does motivate us to do what we want to be doing towards the one we love.

But that's not the foundation, because even if we're not feeling the emotional love, we are still to do the things that are loving regarding God and regarding others. We develop the virtues by practicing them. That's Aristotle, it's also Jesus.

And then as we practice them, they become more and more satisfying to possess those virtues and emotionally more rich. What troubles me is when you have things like, what is the title of that book, Eldritch, The Divine Romance or something like that? I don't know. I'm not putting the guy down, but sometimes the titles and the way people talk, especially women, imply that we are to be romantically connected to God.

What's curious for me and interesting, and I realized this a long time ago as I was reflecting on Genesis 2, Adam was in perfect, unfallen companionship with the Father, and the Father still said, it's not good for man to be alone. Well, he wasn't alone. He had God.

No, God made human beings to be in relationship with others. And when I was a new Christian, I had a little sticker on my desk there and said, Lord, you're my girl. Well, it

didn't work, because God never intended to fulfill that aspect of my life.

He intended that to be for someone else. So we were made for each other. And so all this to say that when one is struggling with his affective connection with God, that is not a measure of their spirituality in any way, shape, or form.

And we have not only exalted romantic love in relationships in a way that's harmful for relationships. How could that be harmful? Because when people fall out of love, they fall out of marriage, leave the kids behind and hook up with somebody else that they just happen to have emotional taps into. Everybody brings baggage into those relationships and sooner or later the honeymoon is going to be over.

And unless your commitment is not, your relationship is not grounded on promise, but grounded on emotions, you're going to be up and down all the time. So it's damaging if that's the way you go. Same thing with God.

Where's God? I don't feel God anymore. He must not really exist. He must not care about me.

It's a common experience. I'm just simply saying don't measure God that way or the quality of your relationship with God in that way because that is not a sound biblical way to measure it. And it's not clear to me if this, if Jack is saying that he is just feeling emotionally detached or maybe he has some sort of an issue where he is emotionally detached from people because there are some who have that difficulty and it's not something that will necessarily change.

And so I think the comfort he can take from what you're saying is that that's not how we're joined to Christ. We're not joined to Christ by our emotional feelings. We're joined to Christ because we die with him in his death and we're raised with him.

We're joined to him. We're in union with Christ and he stands in our place and God has adopted us into his family. That's the foundation of being a Christian.

And so if you can't, if those emotions aren't there either because they haven't developed or because you can't develop them, then you might want to think about this using other terms because maybe love is a scary term when you've experienced this emotional detachment. Think about other words like admiration and loyalty and faithfulness and appreciation and intellectual appreciation, gratitude, gratitude, all of these things. You don't have to feel any sort of certain thing but it's a settled disposition that you have towards God.

Not something that goes up and down with an emotion but these are kind of more intellectual ways of looking at love and what it involves and loyalty and being connected to someone. So maybe if you think about it in those terms that will help you kind of make sense of what's involved in being in union with Christ. Yeah and I think the

expectation is one of the hardest things.

We grow up in a culture that is deeply focused on feelings and that influences the church and relationships in the church and also our relationship with God. Even the word relationship isn't in the Bible. I mean when you talk about God, there's a kind of relationship that's characterized but sometimes we build all kinds of elements into that word and then when we apply it to God we expect all of those elements to be in place, okay, I've seen this happen.

And so like relationship with God, well what relationship is communication? We're in relationship, we talk to each other. So if we're in relationship with God then I talk to God and God talks to me. You know, why is that so controversial? And my response is because that's not the biblical characterization of relationship with God.

What we can't do is one famous author, very good man, no longer with us but I don't want to name his name because I don't want to seem like I'm taking a shot at him. But he said take human relationships as your measure and then in a sense expand them in their intensity or meaningfulness and that's what relationship with God entails. I think that's backwards, that's the tail wanking the dog.

What we have to do is go to the text and find out what does the text say a relationship with God looks like and feels like. And then where there is an analog in those things to human relationships we can make the connection. But we don't start with a robust understanding of human relationships and then try to use that as the model, the paradigm by which we have relationship with God.

We start with God's revelation of himself regarding us and we work with that. And some people are going to just go, wow, they're just shooting stars. That's just the way they're made.

But that's not me. And I'm very happy to talk about this. I've talked about it many times before.

Sometimes yesterday I sat down in the morning to be with the Lord and I just said, I'm here. I'm here, Lord. It's easy not to do this.

It's easy to be distracted by activity because I like being productive and sitting there, getting ready to talk with God doesn't feel productive to me sometimes. I know I'm supposed to do it. It's good for me.

But it's like, so maybe I open up my devotional, my Puritan devotional. Maybe I start giving thanks. But I start out by saying, okay, I'm here, which means it's just me.

And here I am because that's all I can bring. I can bring myself to this spot right now before you, Lord. And if you want to do more, okay, we're going to talk about some

things, you know, and I use the Lord's prayer sometimes and other things going on.

So if I get going, it makes it easier. But there was a discipline to it if I want to keep that relationship rich and alive. But it's got to be on his terms, not mine, and it cannot be driven by my emotions.

If that's the thing that is the measure of my relationship with God, then I'm going to be disappointed much of the time. Well, if your goal is to experience emotions, then you're going to try to work those emotions up. That's not actually seeking God.

That's actually seeking the emotion. So don't make that your goal. Your goal is to seek God and then let whatever emotions come, let them come.

So I think you've hit on what I wanted to say about this, Greg, and that is the way to develop any sort of relationship with somebody or connection with somebody as much as you're able is to spend time with them. So praying and looking at who God is in his word, you read the Bible and not just in his word. There are books you can read.

The more time you spend meditating on who God is, thinking about what he's done, thinking about what he's done for others, for you in history, what he's going to do in the future, and his character, all these things, that's how you develop this connection and those words, the admiration, the loyalty, the gratitude, all of those things. That's how you develop those. And I always recommend a couple books by Michael Reeves.

One is called *Delighting in the Trinity* and the other one is called *Rejoicing in Christ*. So if you want to see God presented in a way that inspires all of these good things, not necessarily even emotions, but even just an intellectual appreciation, you need to look at him and be around people who also are looking at him. And so those are two books that I recommend a lot and I think they're helpful.

All right, let's go to the next question. This one comes from Tracy M. Should I stay in a church that is slowly drifting away from historic Christianity and seems to question basic beliefs such as the authority of the Old Testament, heaven, hell, evangelism, et cetera? That's not drifting. The authority of the Old Testament, questioning that, questioning heaven and hell, and evangelism, that's, I mean, if taking those characterizations at face value, this church has already fallen off the cliff in my view.

And my question is going to be, why would you stay there? Now I suspect part of the answer is I have friends there. Well, that's good. Well, you should maintain those relationships with your friends.

But the reason that you go to a church is not to make friends. The reason you go to a church is to be, I mean, it's not just like a social club, which I understand that Tracy, Tracy gets that, but I want to just adjust the focus. The reason that we go to church is to be fed spiritually, is to be part of a community that as a community is committed to

Christ and the things that Christ considers important.

And then we are taught in those things so that we can grow in our spiritual maturity. We are disciplined in some measure in that environment corporately and then also individually, hopefully with other people, older Christians that could be in our life in that circumstance. If you are not getting what the church is there for, those things I just described, then there's no reason to go there.

Okay. So let's just say you buy groceries at Vons and you know the checkers and you've been doing that for years. And all of a sudden Vons decides to triple their prices and you go, I can't afford these groceries.

I'm going to go to Ralph's. These are local food stores here in Southern California. I'm going to go to Ralph's.

Okay. But wait a minute. You'll know the checkers at the other place.

You're going to keep going there because you could say hi to the checkers. No, because you go there mostly to get food at a reasonable price. You don't go there to say hi to the checkers.

That's an additional benefit. But when the place is not giving you what you, what it needs to give you, you go someplace else to get it. And so this is the same thing here.

Those relationships are important. And by the way, it's possible to pursue those closer relationships, even if you're not part of that body. If you have friends that you can continue meeting with them.

But chances are, if you have good friends at this church and the church is going the direction that you're suggesting, those friends are going that direction too. Or maybe they need to leave. What was just described there is that is a bad picture.

Old Testament? Evangelism? Heaven? Hell? Really? That's on the chopping block? Time to move. And I wonder if that's one reason because you have fellowship there and maybe you've been there for many years. Another reason sometimes people say is they think they want to stay and fight.

And I certainly get that impulse and that desire. But maybe there's a way to continue to do that without actually being there. I guess it depends on the situation.

Maybe it depends on how many people are going this direction, whether the people in the pews are going this direction, the pastors are going this direction. But if a majority are going in this direction, I don't know if you'll be able to make a difference. And it's going to be very draining on you if you're not actually in a church that is teaching the truth.

It is very, very hard for a standard person in the church to make a difference in the direction of the leadership. It doesn't mean God can't use it. I mean, you have to decide the best way to use your time.

But most people who are involved in a local church who are faithful Christians are also giving financially. No, I'm not a tithe person, 10%. I don't think that's a New Testament requirement.

But certainly giving is and giving where you're being fed. And so I suspect, Tracy, you're probably, your family is giving something to this church. But what are you giving to? How can you justify giving money to a church that's moving in this direction? You're just encouraging that.

And so, I mean, that's another little factor. If you're giving money to them, and this is what they're teaching, you're helping them prosper in false teaching. Yeah, so if there might be a way to go to a different church and still have an influence on people there, maybe there's a Bible study.

But remember, it is very hard to stand up and question these things and to speak out against them when they come up. And not everyone, I think, is equipped to do that. If you want to try it, I think there's nothing wrong with that.

But you need to be in a real church. You can't be in a church that's questioning all these basic aspects of the Christian worldview. Now, if Tracy's been there for a long time, she, I don't know if she's single or she's married, but it would be certainly appropriate, though not required in my view.

It depends on the relationship that she has with the leadership and how well she knows them, how long she's been there. But to let them know why they're leaving. And that could be face to face, or it could be in a letter, but you have to be careful how you word it, and it's got to be the issues themselves.

And if you go face to face, you have to be respectful of the leadership. They're still, you think of yourself as in a lesser status than them, because they are your leaders. Now, they may be wayward in their leadership, but what you want to, the way to do it is to go with your hat in your hand and say, pastor, here's, we are planning to leave the church.

And the reason is, is principle. We are looking at the things that in the direction the church has been going on, particular issues. This, this, this, and this.

And we do not think this is sound. And so consequently, we need to find a church that is holding to this classical views of Christianity and not going in the direction that you seem to be taking it. And it's by the way, it's not a point of criticism at this situation, the way I'm suggesting you posture, but it's a point of informing.

This is the problem. Here's why we're leaving. And maybe, who knows, maybe that'll make a difference.

You never know. But the point is, you need to be in a church where the truth is being taught, ultimately. No matter how else you try to influence, you know, what is happening.

You need to get fed. Yes. Well, thank you, Jack and Tracy.

Thank you for sending us your question. If you have a question, send it on X with the hashtag STRS or go to our website at str.org. And all you need to do there is just look for our hashtag STRS podcast page. And you'll find a link and all you do is just send us your question.

And then we review them or I review them and I've picked them. And then we respond. So we look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.