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Presentation Transcript
Brakes – Accelerator
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We're currently working our way through a series on human emotions. Did you know that our emotions act like brakes or an accelerator for our behavior? They either motivate us or inhibit us. We're going to talk about that and what that means to each of us in our lives every day. It's actually, sometimes, quite complicated. Emotions cause a lot of people a lot of problems.

The first thing to know is that there are two ways that we can talk about emotions. We can talk about them as *activating* or *motivating*, and we can talk about them as *inhibitory*. Some emotions move us to action – you think about anger or love – and others hold us back – like guilt and shame. So, there are a lot of ways people talk about emotions and the ways they label them, but, for our purpose today, that's the two categories we're going to use.

Also, we're going to talk about the fact that every emotion can be reacted to in an adaptive healthy way or a maladaptive unhealthy way that's not good for us. So that makes it even more complex.

The first one we're going to look at is anger. Here's an example of an adaptive use of anger: My neighbors were wrecking my shrubs, some time back, by tromping on them while playing baseball. So, I confronted them about it. And now they go to the park to play baseball and it seems like everything is okay – at least, from my perspective. They haven't seemed to be angry with me, so all is well. Here's a maladaptive example of anger: A young mother said to me recently that she was getting so angry with her two-year-old that she was making him afraid of her. So, she's got to learn how to control that.

Another emotion that is activating or motivating is sadness or grief. Here's an adaptive example: I know a lady whose daughter committed suicide and she started a community organization to make parents aware of the dangers of social media for their children.

Here's a maladaptive example: A man whose girlfriend abandoned him became embittered toward women and then became passive-aggressive toward women he knew at work.

Okay, another one – fear or terror. An adaptive example of that: A woman who was mugged bought a big dog and took a Krav Maga class so she could better defend herself against further attempts, should they occur. Here's a maladaptive example: A man who was mugged became aggressive toward street people and was arrested for assault.

Another one would be interest and excitement. Here's an adaptive example of that: John was so interested in video games as a child that he went to college, got a degree in software design and had a satisfying experience with his career. On the other side of that: John was so obsessed with video games that he dropped out of high school and flipped burgers for a living until the fast-food industry turned toward robotic burger builders. Then he had to move back in with his mother at 35. (Now I know that they haven't really done that yet, but I was reading an article about one of the hamburger chains working on that and is about ready to unveil it.)

Okay, another example: closeness and tenderness. A motivating emotion: Mary felt so protective of her five-year-old that she read several parenting books and learned how to express love with boundaries. She wanted to good experience for her son. On the other side – maladaptive side – the unhealthy side: Susan felt so protective of her five-year-old that she vigorously protected him from all his mistakes. She was the helicopter parent, so naturally, he became disconnected from the reality of consequences in his life and made a lot of foolish and rash moves until he figured it out for himself at about age 40.

Enjoyment and joy – we think of that as a positive thing. June went to a cross-fit club with a friend and like it so much she joined a club near her, lost weight and became a lot healthier. Madison, on the other hand, joined a cross-fit club and got into it so much that she neglected her college courses and failed three of them. It all depends on how we process all of it.

Another one – adaptive feelings toward self. People call it self-esteem. I talk about it as a positive sense of self. Because John's parents affirmed him as a child, while holding appropriate boundaries on him, John was confident and yet humble about his own abilities. Maladaptively, because Mark's parents indulged him so much, without holding any boundaries, he developed an inflated sense of self and habitually pushed himself forward – so much that others found him obnoxious.

And let's look at one more. We could call sexual desire an emotion, I think. Here's an adaptive thought about it or an example: At 16, Allison fell in love with John and, because of her Christian upbringing, determined to honor him by remaining chaste until they married. Maladaptively, John saw some video porn on a friend's phone and became so obsessed with it he had no desire to engage girls any longer.

Okay, now let's look at some inhibitory emotions – some that hold us back, instead of propelling us forward. How could that be positive? Well, let's look at the maladaptive side first on these.

Anxiety and panic. A nineteen-year-old girl was so anxious she withdrew from social situations. John's friends, on the other side of it – the positive side now (can withdrawal ever be positive?) – well, John's friends would take him to divey bars where they get into fights, and his anxiety about another concussion inhibited him from going with them any longer.

Shame and humiliation – we recognize that as something that holds us back. Joe's father made comments about his worthlessness when he a child – so much that Joe, believing he was doomed to fail, consequently, never put much effort into working toward goals. He was discouraged by his father's approach to him. On the other hand, Avery's mother was always worried about her daughter being overweight. And Avery, believing she was biologically predisposed to adiposity, when she became a teenager, began watching her portion sizes, which reduces her size as well.

Let's think about guilt and culpability. Mary got caught shoplifting at age 15, and was so attacked by her family over the situation that she became much more secretive about her feelings and activities around her parents. Allison, on the other hand, got caught shoplifting at 15 and was so humiliated, it inhibited the temptation to steal.

Emotional pain is another example. John's son was arrested for heroin use, and John's response – because the whole thing was so hurtful to him – was to think of his son as dead from then on, and their relationship suffered. Mike, on the other side of it, married a woman with borderline personality disorder, who attacked their son with a ball bat and would scratch his face in his sleep, if he had an important meeting at work the next day. He withdrew himself and his son from danger.

Contempt or disgust would be another one that is maladaptive we would think. We tend to withdraw from those things. Mary's professor was, in her opinion, a sexist pig, so she decided to show her disgust for him by failing his class – very intelligent.... Jill's husband spoke to her and her children using the most vile words, and broke things in the house when he was drunk. To protect herself and her children, she withdrew to her mother's and got a restraining order, so she didn't have to talk to him anymore.

So there are some examples. The other thing that we want to talk about is that emotions serve a very important part in our lives in that they are *signals*. Here's how that might work. Emotions tell us that something needs attention.

Let's say that we're often irritated with our children. So that can motivate us to look for the reason. Why am I feeling this way? Well, is it because the devil spawned rotten little

devils, or is it because they're reacting to a lack of consistent boundary-holding on my part? Are they normal kids with an overstressed dad or mom? Or are they lacking in the kind of attention that communicates love to them? You know, we can pay attention to them, but if it's not the kind of attention that communicates love, then it's for nothing. If you want to know what that kind of attention is, go to our Website, liferesource.org and look up our series on *Practical Christian Parenting*. There you'll find an entire presentation explaining it.

Judges frequently send men to me that have beaten up their wives – you know, domestic violence stuff – for anger management. It would probably be better if they would send these guys to someone who could help them find out *why* they're angry and can help them become less so, but that's what they know to do, so that's what they do. And it's not because it's ill-will on their part. It's just that they don't know what's possible. Such an edict by a judge focuses on the man's behavior and thinking his way out of trouble. But it doesn't focus on the *cause* of the problem, which is the troublesome emotion. And, when those guys show up at my office, we use the anger as proof that something needs attention in their lives. And I ask them, "Well, wouldn't you rather just get rid of it, rather than having to *manage* it for the rest of your life?" And they kind of look at me, and then they say, "Yeah, that would be great," and we get to work.

I worked with a man once, who had been depressed for as long as he could remember. He felt no anger, no happiness – only sadness – which is rather unusual for a man. If they're depressed, most of them feel angry. But this one was sad. And he said, "I can't figure out *why* I'm so sad. I don't have anything to be sad about." Well, over the course of his therapy, he understood that his mother's demeaning approach to him caused him to feel defective and unloved, and consequently, sad. Once he was no longer sad, he was no longer depressed. So, in the end, the uncomfortable feeling of sadness propelled him to go looking for the cause. Something needed attention and he knew it.

Do you have anything like that in your life? Are you troubled by some emotions that are getting in the way? Well, that's there for a reason and it's to help you figure out that there's something going on that needs attention.

There are three difficulties in dealing with emotions. Number one, emotions are processed before cognition. Now, what does that mean? As information comes up your spinal column into your brain, the first thing it hits is your emotional center. So we feel emotion before we've had a chance to think. That's part of the reason why they motivate us so effectively. But, as we saw earlier, we can be motivated to either adaptive action or destructive unhealthy action. So, before an emotion can be helpful, we need to engage our thinking about it as well.

Let's look at a scripture. It's in Galatians 5:21.

Galatians 5:21 – *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, against such things there is no law.*

Notice, in this scripture, that love, joy and peace are given to us, by God, as gifts of the Spirit, as is self-control, by which we *manage* our love and joy. So, before an emotion can motivate us adaptively, most of the time it needs to be informed by our thinking. Just because we feel a certain emotion doesn't mean that we have to act on it immediately.

Look with me at another scripture. That one is in Ephesians 4:26.

Ephesians 4:26 – *Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. If we are angry, we can be motivated to action. But let the anger be tempered with reason – or thinking, cognition – so that our response is adaptive rather than destructive.*

When I saw those boys running up in my juniper to get that baseball over and over again, if I had gone out there and reacted the way I wanted to – the way I was inclined to, because I was angry – things wouldn't have worked out too well. But I had to calm myself and become polite and talk directly, but politely, to the father.

I had a lady in my office some time ago, and she felt sadness about her daughter's lack of motivation in school. That anxiety she was feeling and the sadness was motivating her to nag her daughter. I asked her if she thought it was helping. She said that she could see that it was making things worse. And I said, "Do you remember that Jesus said He was going to heal the brokenhearted?" And she said that she did. And I said, "Do you believe that He can do that?" And she said she did. And I said, "Well, the problem here is, you're trying to do God's work for Him and fix your daughter's heart." She looked at me with a wry smile and asked, "You mean I'm not God?" So, after we got done laughing, she asked, "If I can't fix her, what can I do?" And I said, "Well, I think loving her, and encouraging her, and empathizing with her, setting age-appropriate boundaries for her are all within your realm of influence. You can do those things, but you need to let *her* work it out for herself within a safe environment. Part of this problem is probably because she doesn't feel up to the task. So, if you affirm her as a person and bolster her sense of self, that's going to go a long way to helping."

Another difficulty with emotions – this is the second one – is that emotions are sometimes unconscious and, consequently, hard to detect. This is because we cleverly do many things to keep our maladaptive emotions away from ourselves. Every emotion has three aspects to it. We talked about this last time, but it definitely bears repeating. There's an awareness – "I'm angry, I'm sad," etc. There's a sensation – "I feel it in my heart, my throat, my shoulders, my fist," whatever. And there's an impulse – "I want to cry," if we're sad. "I want to smash his face," if we're angry. And if we're depressed, we want to eat worms and die. So, if we can't find all three of these parts, it's because we're hiding them from

ourselves. And we do this hiding from ourselves in a way, that in my field, we call that *defenses*.

I was working with a woman years ago, who had done a lot of work around a relationship with her father, and she thought she was done with it. And she said one day, while she was doing her work, that she always felt her anger in her hands. So, sometime after that she was talking to me about how happy she was that she'd gotten over her father's neglect when she was child. And, as she talked, her voice became louder and more shrill, and her hands balled up into fists, which she was waving around. I said, "You're over your father?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Look at your hands." Once she was conscious of that, she dropped them like rocks into her lap.

So, we're going to talk a lot more how we defend ourselves against our emotions in our next installment in this series, but, for now, we'll move on.

A third difficulty is that emotions can be difficult to face. We hide from them, but once we see them, then we also resist facing them sometimes.

I had a man in my office some time ago who was intensely sad. And he knew it, but he was afraid that, if he went into sadness, he would be swallowed by it and end up in the corner of a mental ward, cutting out paper dolls, as he put it. But once he gathered up the courage to face his sadness, and did it, he wondered later why he had been so afraid of it. So, feeling and talking about our feelings takes the sting out of them, and brings it out in the open, where we can look at it with our logic, instead of just our feelings, and makes it less scary. And then he did some EMDR and that helped even further. It helped him quite a bit, in fact.

So, the problem in his issue is this: the only way to move past an emotion is go through it. There's no other way. Anything else is avoidance and it's a continuation of self-deception.

Another thing to think about related to emotions – and we've touched on this a bit – is that they are motivators for change. Connections that we make in our lives can be learned and unlearned and so emotions motivate us, sometimes, to do this. They can motivate us to grow spiritually. They can motivate us to help others. They can make us so disgusted with ourselves that we overcome maladaptives in our hearts and lives. And they can hurt us so badly that we become desperate for relief. David said that the longer he hid from his own guilt, the more he felt like he was drying up and withering away toward eternal death. He was a miserable person. But he also tells us that, once he coughed up his sin and got right with God, he experienced a new lease on life. He was free! – which is exactly what I hear from people, today, who face their fears and feelings.

Just go back and think about that thing with David. David was not aware of what he was doing, and so God sent Nathan, the prophet, to tell him a story about a man who took

another man's pet lamb and served it as dinner to some of his friends. David was enraged by this story, because he'd been a shepherd and knew how cute little lambs can be. And then Nathan told, "You're that man." Then he understood. It cleared away his self-deception from a deceitful heart and he acknowledged what was going on to his everlasting credit.

Another thing that I wanted to talk about briefly here...and I was thinking recently about the people who come to my office for help, but most of the time, they're having problems with their emotion. They're angry. They're anxious. They're sad. They're ashamed. They feel guilty about this or that. But they've been told they need cognitive behavioral therapy. And they like that because feeling what they feel is hard. They're rather think their way through it and they'd rather try to change their behavior and focus on that. And, of course, the insurance companies push the focus on behavior and cognition, or thinking, because it's more directive – more left-brained, like they are – and less likely expensive for them, because it tends to be shorter term – because you can only go so far with rethinking and self-management. And I do some cognitive therapy with all my clients. I'm not saying there is no place for it. Cognition is also a part of the total person, but so is emotion. So, our issues usually revolve around more than just our thinking. Our emotions almost always come into play.

So, if we ever hope to find peace, we have to face our feelings, as well as our thoughts. And besides that, God wants *all* of us.

Mark 12:30 – *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* Get it? The whole person. So that includes our emotions.

If we hope to get past spiritual arrest, or regression, or depression, or any of the things that take us down, we need to deal with *all* that is in us. We need to face the *whole* person. And if we do that, then we can let God help us get off the brakes and on the accelerator for change.

So let's think about being motivated adaptively by our emotions – to take adaptive action when it's wise and to withdraw when it's wise. And let's integrate our intellect and emotions together for a better life and to be closer to God. And let's also think about facing and confronting maladaptive emotions so they don't rule us without our knowing it and contaminate our relationships in our lives.

Next time, in our series – *Taking a Look at Emotions* – we will talk more about the nature of self-deception and our emotion.

So, until next time then, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God. Look with me here in Mark 12:30.

