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Presentation Transcript
Mental Health and the Bible – Sense of Self
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April 13, 2018

We're currently working on a series, *Mental Health and the Bible*, and the title of today's presentation is *Sense of Self*. It's the fourteenth in the series.

Some time back a professional woman – very successful – came to my office. She had three children. She'd married twice before and had just broken up with a boyfriend. All three of them were emotionally unavailable for her. One was an alcoholic and one was verbally abusive. Why did she keep connecting to the same kind of man? When I asked her about that, she said, "I just want to feel special and loved, but none of these men had the capacity to do that" – which wasn't really an answer to my question, but it was revealing about what she was seeking. At the time she came, she was developing a relationship with another man. And he was kind, gentle, empathic, relational, fun loving, and well off. Her two adult children, after getting to know this man, told her that he was perfect. And, as they got to know each other, she began to be afraid that it wasn't right for her. The reason she gave was, that he had been married previously and happy, and she doubted that he could make her feel special. I think underneath that, she was worried that she wasn't able to make him feel special either. So she started to find faults with him. Week by week, I could hear the list growing. She told me, at one point, he was too nice. She confessed to me she was, as she put it, "ready to bolt." She would point to more harsh characteristics of her former male connections as examples of how he needed to be, without really realizing what she was saying. They she would remember that they were all disrespectful to her, and say, "Oh yeah, that's why I ran from all of them." She said, "I'm attracted to the wrong kind of man and repulsed by the right kind." Why?

Well, it always go back to our past. These things...you know, we learn how to be in the world from our earliest experience. And this woman's father, while he was kind and not abusive at all, he was gone a lot. And while he was around, he was always busy. He didn't pay much attention to her. So while he wasn't abusive, he was emotionally neglectful of his daughter. Her mother was very much a perfectionist – always neat, always cleaning, kids weren't allowed to make

messes. She couldn't recall her mother ever expressing any other emotion than anger – and not too much of that. She'd clean the house, fix the food, make sure the kids did their chores, bought their clothes, took them to school. But she never read to them, or tucked them in, or encouraged them, or hugged them, or kissed them. My client recounted a time when she was a teenager – that she walked into her parents' bedroom while they were in bed, and asked them if they loved her. And her father jumped up and gave her a hug, and said, "Of course, we love you!" And her mother said, "Don't be silly." Nothing more was ever said or done about that. So, while her parents fed her, clothed her, and provided shelter, and were not physically abusive to her, she grew up in a family where her emotional needs were ignored by both parents. And because we tend to go with what's familiar – because that's easier – she was attracted to men who were emotionally unavailable and leery of men who were available emotionally.

What's unfamiliar to us produces anxiety and we all hate that. She would run from men that produced anxiety, which were people that were *not* like her mom and dad. So that's one way to think about her situation. But that is all only the result of something else. What would that be? It's all about how she sees herself – how she feels about herself. She would say, "I want to feel special – because I never have – but I don't deserve it and it makes me uncomfortable when people try to make me feel special." What a dilemma – repelled by the very thing she wants. One of the big clues was about her discomfort with compliments. To her, they didn't fit in with her view of herself. She wasn't as good as other people would think or wasn't deserving.

Let's talk about how we develop a sense of self, since that's what we're talking about today. When we're born, we're, pretty much, a blank page. We have enough brain to breathe and digest, and we have a reflex to cry when we're wet, or cold, or lonely, or we need to be changed, or we're hungry. But that's about it. But as we're born – we can imagine a baby lying in a crib – and as time passes, the baby, let's say, starts to get hungry. And since babies don't have a sense of time, it has to happen right now, or they're going to feel like it might never happen. And they know that they can't take care of that need themselves. And at some level biologically, they also know that if they don't get fed, it could kill them. So, you know, when you're a baby crying in a crib, to that baby, that's a life-threatening situation. That's how they think about it. It's scary. That's why they're crying.

Okay, so the baby has a need. And then, if the need gets a little bit more urgent, then there's a little brake and accelerator in everybody's brain, and the baby pushes down on the "gas," and that deregulates it. It gets upset and it starts to cry. Then, as it cries, time passes, and if parents are good parents, they meet the baby's need. In this case, they would feed the baby. Mother picks the baby up, and holds it, and looks in its eyes, and feeds it, talks to it – all that. And it looks like the mother is soothing the baby, but what really is happening there, is she's meeting the baby's need – which is reason it was crying. So now the baby puts on the breaks and it starts to reregulate and calm itself down. Okay?

Now, how many times does that happen in the first year of a baby's life? Every two to four hours, right? So that's thousands of times? And, if the baby is consistently cared for, the baby learns to trust that everything is going to be okay, and that "I am loved," and that eye contact back and forth – you know, looking down at the diaper and up at the baby, and down at the diaper and up at the baby – that makes the baby feel connected. The first job of a baby in its first year of life is to learn *how* to connect to develop a secure relationship with parents. So, it has plenty of opportunity to learn that – or, if the parents are neglectful, *not* learn it.

So, when you have a mother that thinks feeling loved is silly, what do you think is going on there between that baby and that mother? Well, she is okay when it comes to feeding and all that – the physical stuff – but she doesn't make a connection with the infant. And so you can just think about that right there – right there in the beginning – in the first year of that child's life, she's starting to get the idea that there's something defective about her. "Why don't they love me? What's wrong with me?" And that's how babies think – that they're always the cause of it. So we can start to see what's happening there.

Now, in the attachment school, the whole thing is right there in that little cycle that goes around – the trust cycle – or, if it's not sufficient, the anxiety cycle. And, if things are going well – if the parents are good enough at taking care of their baby's needs – emotional and physical – the baby learns "I am loved. I am known. I'm understood. I'm safe." They also learn that asking for help works – "I get the care and help that I need." And they learn that their environment is safe. So people that can do that are secure. They can take risks, they can reach out, they can get help, and have a deep-seated feeling that everything's going to, generally, work out all right and that they're okay as a person. And that will stand them in good stead whether others are critical of them or not, because that's been placed in there at a very early level.

So, like I said, they believe the self is okay – and that doesn't mean "better than," but good enough, acceptable – *okay*. It's a good word. You know, have you ever watched movies, and people are speaking a foreign language, and you'll hear them say, "Okay?" That's something from English that has just, pretty much, gone around the world, I think. And everybody knows what that means. It means that there is sort of just a status quo of okayness.

Now, let's look at the other situation – where attachment is *insecure*. The baby learns, "I'm not understood or well-known. I'm not loved. I'm not okay. I'm not safe. Asking doesn't work. I can only depend on myself and my environment is unpredictable or dangerous, even." You think of all the kinds of things that come from that. You know, if a baby has to be preoccupied with self-care, when really they should be cared for by others, they can become narcissistic as they get older. Asking doesn't work, so they become manipulative or bullying or whatever in order to get what they need and "I can only depend on myself" – serious trust issues there, which leads to broken relationships. Reaching out for relationship is dangerous and unpredictable. Sometimes they're afraid to change and take risks, because it's too scary. They tend *not* to ask for help,

because they don't believe it will work. They only trust self. And they believe the self is defective.

So all the different attachment styles that people have are based on learning. And it starts right there in the first year of life when a baby is hard-wired to learn how to relate to mom and dad. So an infant's first learning is based on those events – how they're nurtured and cared for. They learn about themselves from their parents.

Well, what's important about this? Well, one of the things that's really important is that they ascribe narcissism to a mental illness sometimes, when really all that is learned behavior. And what is learned can be *unlearned*. It's not necessarily permanent, even though it's early. So God talks to us about child development and the implications of it. David made a statement about his development as a child in Psalm 22:9. He said:

Psalms 22:9 – *Yet you are He who took me from the womb, and You made me trust You at my mother's breasts. On You I was cast from my birth and from my mother's womb You have been my God.*

So, let's think about that a minute. He said God took him from the womb, and God made him learn how to trust Him at his mother's breasts. So – I forget his name now – but there was a great Swiss child development expert, back in the early days of psychology, who said, "All of that attachment stuff gets transferred to God." And, if you read this scripture, you will *know* that what that man observed is true. And I've known that for a long time, even before I studied psychology, because I've talked to so many women that told me that their father ruined their picture of what God is like as a father. The word *father* meant something other than what God means by it – and that wouldn't be good. So, all the trust we learn from our nurturing as babies gets transferred to God as we get older. And this happens day-to-day as the trust cycle repeats thousands of times in our infancy.

Now, if you read down the page through this psalm, you will learn that these are *not* just the words of David, but also the words of Jesus as a human being. This passage turns out to be a prophecy. Even though Jesus was God, as a human, He needed a good mother and father to help Him develop a foundation for His faith. And that started with Mary – nursing, and holding and caring for Him as a baby.

Let's look at another scripture. Let's notice what Paul said about ministry in 1 Thessalonians 2:7. You know, Paul was a pretty crusty guy who went around persecuting Christians before He became converted, but he was known by God by name before he was born – we're told in the scripture – and specially selected to bring the Word to the whole world. So once he was converted, how did he minister? Well, he says to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:7:

1 Thessalonians 2:7 – *But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own child. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.*

So he was specially selected to spread the Word of God to the whole world. How did he do that? No radio, no trains, no cars, no planes. Well, he loved the people he served. He was sacrificial in the love that he had. It's all right there in that verse. He sacrificed himself for them. He was gentle with them.

Now, I'm going to use a term here that we've all heard, but this is a profoundly important term. He *had their backs*. He bared his back to save theirs – and to have theirs. He didn't start out that way, of course, but he had to learn how to love them. And how did he do that? Well, God helped him. And I think that Paul must have had a really good mother for him to be able to do these things.

I meet people that are like the lady I was telling you about. And she's a nice person, but she doesn't really believe that relationships can be repaired. That's why she runs from them instead of trying to work them out. Where did she learn that? That's part of the picture of being insecurely attached. People that have that kind of attachment cut and run from relationships when they get difficult, because they don't believe that relationships can be fixed. Whereas, people who are secure have had their parents – when there's been a relational rupture – go to them and get it straightened out. And they know that can happen. It's always a possibility.

So, I think also God helped him. We're told – he tells us – that he was in Arabia for three years, where he was instructed personally by Jesus Christ. God helped him. God got his attention and instructed him. How did he get his attention? Well, he blinded him on the Damascus Road. That got his attention and then that made him willing to listen – willing to enter into a relationship with God, which he was able to do. And that probably had to do with how he was brought up.

So, in our culture today, we are losing sight of how to trust. We sit at dinner time with people we say we love and we focus on our phones. That used to be impolite – disrespectful, even. And now people don't know that they shouldn't do that. So we're gradually losing the ability to connect with other people.

If we think about that trust cycle that babies are in when they're born, that teaches all of us that, from cradle to grave, we want one thing more than anything else. And that is that we want someone to have our back – not just to say that they love us, but to be there. And we are losing the ability to *have* someone's back. Like the woman I spoke of in the beginning, we're all losing the ability to allow someone to have *our* back as well. There's distancing going on in our culture. It's never occurred in the world before.

Another thing to think about here is that God created all humans to be receptacles of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:11 it says:

Romans 8:11 – *If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you – it’s just assumed that’s happening – He who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who dwells in you.*

So, God and Jesus both plan to come and live in all of us. And their plan is to draw all of us into a close, loving, trusting, satisfying relationship. They *want* us. We’re all important to them. So what conclusion can we draw from this? Well, we can draw that God loves us because we’re His – not because of what we do or don’t do. If you have children, you know how that works. We might get angry with them because they’re misbehaving or whatever, but that doesn’t, in any way, affect the way we *feel* about them. We *love* them – because they’re ours. That’s why God calls us His Father, just so that we can understand that – like human parents love their children. Even when they do foolish things, mean things or careless things, things that hurt themselves or others, they’re still our kids and we still love them. So it’s not hard to understand how God feels about us, if we’ll allow it.

The fact that it’s like that – that it’s not about performance, but it’s about relationship – that means that we are okay. And, if that’s the way it really is between us and God, what does that make all of us? Well, it makes us okay. You know, “I’m an idiot, but I’m still okay.” “I’m a failure, but I’m still okay.” “I’m a weakling, but I’m okay.” “I’m poor, but I’m still okay.” “I could even be rich, and I’d still be okay.”

So, from *okay* we have a base from which to go forward. Forward to what? If we’ll just put our phones down, forward into a relationship with God – just put our phones down and talk to Him. He would enjoy it. Forward toward having the backs of our children, our mate, our congregation, our nation – noticing who needs a hand, noticing who needs an ear, noticing who needs direction – that would certainly be true with our kids sometimes – noticing who doing all the work and lightening the load.

I was talking to a lady the other day – it’s in a small congregation – and she and another woman are the only ones in the congregation – at least, that’s the way she feels about it – that do any of the weekly chores that are needed to have church services. You know, they make the coffee, they wash the dishes, they set up the chairs. And everybody else just stands around and talks. It’s also possible – if we grew up in the environment like the lady I was telling you about – to reconstruct our sense of self. If it’s been damaged, that can be taken care of. It’s possible to change how we think about ourselves.

I’m going to talk a little bit about the therapy I do now. I use a two-pronged approach. I call one *bottom up* – that is, I help people go back to that cycle and rewrite those memories. So how can you do that if they can’t remember it? Well, the system I use is called EMDR. What that does is,

it actually rewrites unconscious memory as well as conscious memory. The way we do that is, we take a situation in the present day where they're upset about something – like this lady that I was telling you about, where she irrationally is feeling like she ought to run away from a really good guy – and I focus on the feeling she has while that's happening, and it will go back to what's causing it. Sometimes she can remember, sometimes she can't. What we learn from this is, once those things are cleared away, it's much easier to move on when the hurts are healed. Then we realize we can change. This lady saw, while doing EMDR, that her mother didn't mean to starve her emotionally – that she herself was starved as a child. So she didn't know how to express love. She was doing the best she could. She made the comment, "I guess that's just how life works sometimes." And so I use my *poker metaphor*. When you play poker, sometimes you get good hands, sometimes you don't, but you have to play *all* of them. Part of your life is good – I mean, you're intelligent, you're educated, you're motivated, you have nice kids, you didn't proceed down the same road your mother did. Those are all good things. Right? But your mother was emotionally neglectful, and so, how are you going to play that? Are you going to feel sorry for yourself? Or, are you just going to continue running away from people? Or, are you going to do something different? She even made the statement, after an EMDR session, "I can learn to think differently about my mother."

And this leads us to the second prong in the process – I call this *top down*. That's helping people learn how to think more positively about themselves. One of the things I do is ask people about the self-talk that they have going on in their heads – is it positive or negative? And then I help them examine the negative thoughts that they habitually think, show them how they're not true, and then show them what *is* true, and help them to use the truth to dispute the wrong in their habit of thinking.

I'll give you an example of how that works. This woman again – she said she felt defective and not lovable, hence the desire to be special. So I suggested that belief – that she was defective – wasn't really true and not at its base. When she was born, she was perfect, and God loved and wanted her. So, when she catches herself telling herself she's defective, she should dispute that within herself. "I'm not defective. I'm God's child. It's okay for me to be imperfect. I'm still okay, even though I have faults. I know God still loves me. Knowing that, how should I then behave? What should I do?" And then, she put it, she's going to "fake it until she makes it." And, at some point, it won't be faking it anymore. She will have caused herself a profound personality change. Her sense of self is going to become different.

I remember talking to a young woman, who I had treated some five years earlier, and she said, "Do you remember all the bad things that happened to me and how helpless I felt?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Oh, that's barely there anymore." And when I met her, she did feel completely helpless, and dumb, and unable to be successful at life. She said, "I can and am accomplishing life's goals now. I know I can be a good loving person." So, there you have it. She changed. She saw herself differently. Her sense of self changed. And it changed while I watched her go through the motions of changing it.

Don't get discouraged about problems you have about how you think about yourself. Those can be changed. And God is there to help you. He doesn't like you thinking things that aren't true and that are negative about yourself. He wants you to feel, not superior to others, but certainly not inferior either. He loves all of His people the same. So, if you can come to that, then you're going to feel okay, in spite of faults, and you won't feel overinflated about successes.

So, if you want to hear others in this series on *Mental Health and the Bible*, you can go to our Website, liferesource.org, and search for *Mental Health and the Bible*, and they'll pop up for you. Once you find them, you're just a click or two away from listening to them – very handy.

We should also be pleased to receive feedback from you. Sometimes the very best topics come from your comments and questions. And you can do that by emailing us at bjacobs@liferesource.org. And of course, we'd also appreciate a contribution. Maintaining a Website is expensive.

So, until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.