

Unpacking Emotional Barriers to the Gospel

Truth in Love Apologetics Conference

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“
Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.”

Ephesians 5:1-2

Emotional Barriers

Family Dysfunction

- Either chaos or rigidity, lack of loving attachment, poor modeling, controlling authority figures.

Psychological Disorders

- Depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, can add a sense of barrier between the individual and God.

Church Hurt

- Betrayal, hypocrisy, and spiritual abuse cause deep mistrust and emotional hurt.
- Sometimes specific to individuals; other times generalize to organized religion.

Disappointment and Anger with God

- Anger at God often arises from tragic deep loss, unanswered prayers, and suffering experiences.

Distorted Views of God

- Perceiving God as harsh, distant, or indifferent blocks spiritual connection and trust.

Assumptions for this Presentation

God is Actively Seeking the Lost

- God is active, not passive in the salvation of souls.
- He is at work in things we see and understand, and in what we don't see or understand.

Biblical Truth as the Foundation

- Biblical teaching is true, essential, and necessary.
- Getting people emotionally healthy doesn't save them.
- The Biblical worldview gives a framework for to the problem of pain and suffering (but doesn't answer all questions).

Wounds of all Kinds have their Origin in the Fall

- Emotional wounds stemming from trauma, loss, or negative relational or church experiences that cloud and/or block spiritual reception. Also, depression, anxiety, fear of rejection, control, etc.
- Satan seeks to use wounds (as well as blessings!) to create confusion and barriers to God.

Assumptions for this Presentation

Human Beings are Accountable to God

- I am not suggesting wounded people are not accountable to God.
- However, we all have different starting places and platforms to grow from.

Impact on Gospel Reception

- Emotional pain and brokenness can create resistance to spiritual truths despite sound intellectual arguments.
- Can create misunderstandings that hinder or impair growth.

Improved Empathy and Understanding of Others

- Recognizing emotional barriers allows us to engage others with wisdom and spiritual sensitivity.

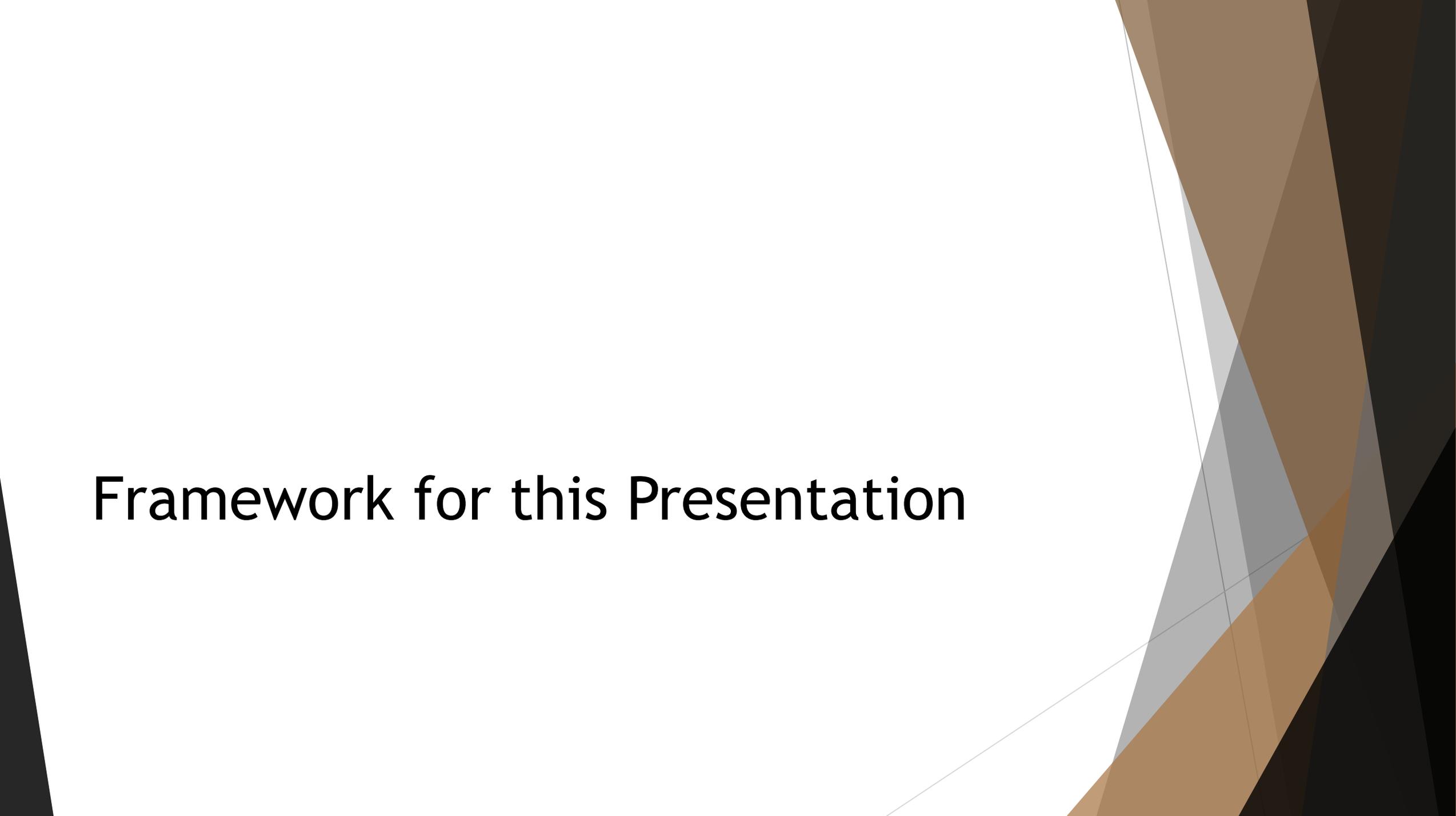
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²⁴ And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, ²⁵ In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; ²⁶ And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

”

2 Timothy 2:24-26

Framework for this Presentation



Overview

▶ Framework Basis

- ▶ Henry Cloud's model shared in Changes That Heal offers insight into healthy emotional, relational, and spiritual growth

▶ Key Lenses

- ▶ Grace, Truth, and Time (vs. License or Condemnation and Lack of Maturity)

▶ Key Developmental Areas

1. Bonding with Others
2. Separating from Others
3. Sorting Out Good and Bad
4. Becoming an Emotional Adult

▶ Impact of Misalignment (++/--)

- ▶ Emotional and relational dysfunction and spiritual resistance.

▶ Pathway for Healing

- ▶ The framework guides believers to understand pain's influence and find healing growth.

1a. Bonding with Others (Attachment)

▶ Core Concept

- ▶ Bonding is the ability to form deep, trusting relationships.
- ▶ It's foundational to emotional and relational health and spiritual openness.
- ▶ Without bonding, people feel isolated, anxious, and unworthy of love.

▶ Common Barriers

- ▶ Attachment issues show up as fear, mistrust, and isolation from trauma or neglect.
- ▶ Problems bonding with key attachment figures can be projected onto others including God, authority figures, and the church.

▶ Gospel Implications for People Lacking Secure Bonding:

- ▶ May struggle to believe God is trustworthy or loving.
- ▶ May resist intimacy with Christ or the church.
- ▶ May initially feel overwhelmed by love of the church but eventually feel they don't belong or aren't good enough.
- ▶ May feel unworthy of grace.

1b. Bonding with Others (Attachment)

▶ Spiritual Guidance

- ▶ Scriptures assure God's closeness and comfort to the brokenhearted and fearful.
- ▶ Genesis 2:18 - "It is not good for man to be alone."
- ▶ Psalm 68:6 - "God sets the lonely in families."
- ▶ John 15:15 - "I have called you friends..."

▶ Neuroscience Connection

- ▶ Attachment wounds activate the brain's threat system (amygdala), leading to hypervigilance and relational withdrawal. Secure attachments calm the brain.

▶ Practical Application

- ▶ Model God's relational nature through empathy and presence.
- ▶ Help people experience safe connection before expecting theological receptivity.
- ▶ Avoid "love bombing." Don't avoid speaking truthfully, as needed.
- ▶ Understanding these wounds fosters empathy in evangelism and discipleship.

2a. Separating from Others (Healthy Boundaries)

▶ Core Concept

- ▶ Separating is about developing a clear sense of self—knowing where “I” end and “you” begin.
- ▶ It’s essential for autonomy, responsibility, and healthy relationships.

▶ Common Barriers

- ▶ Enmeshment, people-pleasing.
- ▶ Often arise from chaotic family dynamics or fear of rejection.
- ▶ Many people confuse love with enmeshment, people-pleasing or control.
- ▶ True maturity involves setting boundaries while maintaining connection.
- ▶ Boundaries protect identity and allow for freedom and responsibility.

▶ Gospel Implication for People with Poor Boundaries:

- ▶ May struggle with guilt, people-pleasing, or resentment.
- ▶ May feel manipulated by religious expectations.
- ▶ Difficulty with being separate from others but staying connected to them.
- ▶ May blame others or God for their choices.

2b. Separating from Others (Healthy Boundaries)

▶ Scriptural Guidance

- ▶ Bible verses highlight balancing personal accountability and supporting others with compassion (Jude 1:20-23).
- ▶ Galatians 6:2,5 - “Carry each other’s burdens...each should carry their own load.”
- ▶ Proverbs 4:23 - “Guard your heart...”
- ▶ Matthew 5:37 - “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’”

▶ Mental Health Connection

- ▶ Anxiety, people pleasing, etc. often relate to boundary challenges in relationships and misunderstandings about grace.

▶ Practical Application

- ▶ Teach that God respects personal agency—He invites, not coerces.
 - ▶ Think of Jesus with the rich, young, ruler.
- ▶ Encourage clear communication and ownership of choices.
- ▶ Preference, House Rules, Organizational Norms, and Biblical Absolutes

3a. Sorting Out Good & Bad (Acceptance/Change)

▶ Core Concept

- ▶ Many people struggle emotionally and spiritually because they have not learned to integrate both good and bad aspects of themselves, others, and life experiences.

▶ Common Barriers

- ▶ Live in black-and-white thinking
- ▶ Idealize or demonize people
- ▶ Suppress flaws or deny strengths
- ▶ Perfectionism and shame distort understanding of grace and arise from harsh environments. These barriers cause spiritual struggles.

▶ Gospel Implications for People Who Haven't Sorted Out Good and Bad:

- ▶ May reject the Gospel because they feel “too bad” to be loved by God.
- ▶ Resist grace because they believe they must be perfect first.
- ▶ Minimizing ones own flaws may lead to a sense of entitlement or superiority.
- ▶ Struggle with hypocrisy in the church due to idealized expectations.

3b. Sorting Out Good & Bad (Acceptance/Change)

▶ Scriptural Guidance

- ▶ Salvation is based on God's grace, not works, as stated in Romans 8:1 and Titus 3:5, removing condemnation.
- ▶ Philippians 3:12 (CSB), "Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus."
- ▶ Our past doesn't have to determine our future. Peter denied Christ but was restored and empowered (John 21).

▶ Neuroscience Connection

- ▶ Shame triggers fight/flight/freeze responses, blocking openness and spiritual receptivity.

▶ Practical Application

- ▶ Teach discernment of areas for needed growth and grace to empower/sustain it.
- ▶ Help others see that God's love is not based on perfection.
- ▶ Encourage honest reflection, transparency, and confession in safe relationships.
- ▶ Use Scripture to show how God works through flawed people.

4a. Becoming an Adult (Emotional Maturity)

▶ Core Concept

- ▶ Becoming an adult means taking responsibility for your life, emotions, and spiritual growth. It's about moving from dependence to maturity.
- ▶ Emotional maturity means facing reality, making wise choices, and accepting consequences.

▶ Common Barriers

- ▶ Immaturity, dependency, and fear often come from overprotection, permissiveness or trauma.
- ▶ View themselves as either being above (superior) or below (inferior) to others
- ▶ Immaturity may lead to blame, helplessness, and avoidance of growth.

▶ Gospel Implications for People who are Emotionally Immature

- ▶ Expect God or others to “fix” everything.
- ▶ Resist repentance or accountability.
- ▶ Misunderstand grace as license.
- ▶ Difficulty viewing and relating to other people as emotional equals.

4b. Becoming an Adult (Emotional Maturity)

▶ Biblical Guidance

- ▶ Scriptures urge leaving childish ways and working out salvation with reverence.
- ▶ 1 Corinthians 13:11 - “When I became a man, I put away childish things.”
- ▶ Philippians 2:12 - “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”
- ▶ Hebrews 5:14 - “Solid food is for the mature...”

▶ Mental Health Connection

- ▶ Emotional immaturity can manifest as depression, learned helplessness, or entitlement. All of which can hinder taking spiritual responsibility.

▶ Practical Application

- ▶ Encourage growth through grace, truth and time—not shame.
- ▶ Affirm that maturity is a process, not a perfection standard.
- ▶ Provide modeling, feedback, and coaching.

Encouragement and Resources



“¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in Christ’s triumphal procession and through us spreads the aroma of the knowledge of him in every place.

¹⁵ For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

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¹⁶ To some we are an aroma of death leading to death, but to others, an aroma of life leading to life. Who is adequate for these things?

¹⁷ For we do not market the word of God for profit like so many. On the contrary, we speak with sincerity in Christ, as from God and before God.

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 CSB

Encouragement and Hope

Focus on Jesus

- Jesus is compelling
- Increasing clarity when He is in Center

God's Healing Promises

- God comforts the brokenhearted and offers emotional healing through His loving care. (Psalm 147:3)

Believers as Ambassadors

- Believers are called to reconciliation, sharing hope and healing with others patiently.

Healing Opens Hearts

- Emotional healing enables openness to spiritual truth and deeper understanding of the Gospel.

Persistent Outreach

- Patience and persistence in ministry lead to meaningful transformation and spiritual growth.



Practical Engagement Strategies

Importance of Listening

- Being quick to listen and slow to speak fosters empathy and understanding.

Building Relationships Over Time

- Healing often requires patience and consistent care before spiritual sharing.

Don't Feel You have to Defend

- When people have been disappointed or hurt by parents, authority figures, church leaders, or churches, don't feel you have to somehow defend bad behavior.

Make Space for Questions and Doubts

- Allow yourself to hear the person's questions and doubts *without needing to have an answer*.
- Acknowledge your own questions and doubts.

Practical Engagement Strategies

Validating Pain Doesn't Equal Avoiding Truth

- Acknowledging experiences and emotions while upholding truth builds trust and credibility.

Modeling Grace and Truth

- Balancing kindness and honesty reflects effective relational ministry.
- Living in Christ-likeness helps people see Him (Matthew 5:14-16)

Healing Through Empathy and Scripture

- Empathy, patience, and scriptural truth help overcome mistrust and restore spiritual connection.

Support the Person in Healing

- Go through a workbook or course on healing with the person.
- Support them in counseling

Resources and Further Reading

All sources should be read with discernment. Suggested readings do not necessarily mean endorsement of all views presented.

- ▶ Cloud, Henry (2018) *Changes That Heal: Four Practical Steps to a Happier, Healthier You*. Zondervan.
 - ▶ This book outlines four essential emotional skills—bonding, boundaries, expectations, discernment, and emotional maturity—through the lenses of grace, truth, and time. A companion workbook is also available
- ▶ Ryan, Dale & Ryan, Juanita (2012) *Distorted Images of God: Restoring Our Vision (LifeGuide Bible Studies)*. InterVarsity Press.
 - ▶ This Bible study helps readers identify and heal from subtle and overt distortions in their understanding of God using Scripture as a guide.
- ▶ Apostolic Christian Counseling and Family Services - www.accounseling.org



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