It's OK to Be Angry, and, Do Not Sin

Why emotional regulation has a spiritual foundation, and why leaders can no longer ignore it.

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MONDAY MORNING

Thembo had had a lousy Monday. As he drove home in traffic, his inner dialogue continued to fuel the festering wound from the early morning team meeting. Yet again, in the weekly meeting, Sophie had said she wasn't going to get the order done that a high-priority customer was already angry about. This wasn't the first time Sophie had let them down. How on earth was he going to explain yet another delay to the customer? In that moment, Thembo got angry, and before he could catch himself, he got really mad at Sophie. He said something ugly and disrespectful to her, as he was sick of her excuses. Sophie yelled back, while crying in frustration… and the whole mess left the rest of the team feeling afraid. Thembo had stormed out of the meeting.

At lunch time, on his way to get a sandwich, Thembo heard from Michael that Sophie had been very angry and spent a lot of the morning complaining about Thembo to other employees. She had told Michael that Thembo himself had changed to a new system that was slowing everything down, including getting these urgent orders done. She felt unfairly treated. Thembo was always too busy to meet with her, and when she asked for help, he said that upper management hadn't approved new headcount yet. Thembo had never really taken the time to listen to her (and others') concerns about this system and why it wasn't working.

Michael apologised for being the one to tell Thembo this, but they were good friends and often helped each other in this way.

The more Thembo replayed all of this while he drove, the less the self-righteous anger remained. Also, the more aware he became that his behaviour didn't match what he knew was a better way to manage his team, the worse Thembo felt. He'd put his own needs ahead of them, again. Hadn't he left that pattern behind? Why does he keep taking control and ignoring what people ask of him? Michael had given him the reality check. Sophie may have a point. He was the one to change the system. She had asked to talk to him several times, and he never made time. His bad leadership was becoming obvious and he felt ashamed. After all, he was a Christian!

As he pulled into his driveway, Thembo suddenly realised that it was not even two days since Sunday's amazing worship time, and a powerful sermon. What had happened between the moment of loving Jesus with all his heart, and being reminded that God is beyond all of our issues – and the Monday morning meeting? How could he get it so wrong?

He pushed this all aside, and put on his happy Dad face as he walked into the house and kissed his wife hello…

Thembo's story is all too familiar. Most Christian leaders don't have a belief problem. They know what they believe. What they wrestle with is the gap between what they believe and how they respond under pressure.

Pressure doesn't create what comes out of us. It reveals it.

And what it reveals is not just a skills gap. It is a formation question. It's a character question.

Where did we lose our way with our communication, our relationships, and our desire to walk a journey of grace and peace?

To fully understand where we are and where we've come from, let's look at a generational journey of emotional expression.

A few generations ago, the unspoken rule was *be seen, not heard*. Feelings were tolerated in private and corrected in public. Many of us grew up in churches that emphasised that rule: strong faith meant a calm face, and a calm face meant you were fine. It was looked down on to bring your messiness into church. Shine your face. Shine your shoes. You're good!

Today the rule has flipped. *Your feelings are valid.* Name them, share them, honour them. Suppression is treated as harm, and in many ways that correction is needed. But emotional expression has become a rite of passage for the younger generations, and the older generations criticise that approach, while still feeling guilty about their own mishandling of emotion.

Here in South Africa, generational curses take on a whole new meaning. Generations here were shaped by apartheid, the struggle, the born-free generations. So the shift might look different from the outside, but it was still a shift – from silence to fragility and reactivity.

The shift is like a pendulum, and a pendulum that swings from one side to the other hasn't created change. Neither have we. The pendulum still hangs from the same rope. We traded suppression for expression and called it healing, yet neither is the pattern Scripture gives us. Expression is not giving the tools to the current generations any more than suppression helped the previous generations.

God never intended us to suppress our emotions or surrender to them. He intended us to become people with enough inner structure to carry them well.

He calls us to grace, mercy, forgiveness, and joy.

Emotions are God-given, not a flaw to be managed

Scripture never asks us to stop feeling. It shows us a God who feels, and a Saviour who felt fully.

- **Jesus wept** at Lazarus's tomb, even knowing what He was about to do. John 11:35
- **Jesus was angry** in the temple, and His anger moved Him to action, not to sin. John 2:13–17; Mark 3:5
- **Jesus was overwhelmed** in Gethsemane, telling His friends His soul was sorrowful to the point of death. He didn't hide it. He took it to the Father. Mark 14:34
- **The Psalms** give us a whole book of lament, fear, rage and longing, prayed by David, honestly before God. Even during his times of sin and failure, David wrote songs to the Lord.

Paul doesn't say, "Don't be angry." He says *be angry, but do not sin* Ephesians 4:26. The emotion is assumed. What we do with it is the question.

Feeling is not the problem. Feeling without a supportive structure is.

The missing structure has a name: self-regulation

The book of Proverbs provides a strong image every leader should take notice of: a person without self-control is like a city whose walls are broken down Proverbs 25:28. Open to every raid. Unable to protect what matters inside.

The same book says the one who rules their own spirit is greater than the one who takes a city Proverbs 16:32. And James puts it plainly: be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, because human anger doesn't produce the righteousness God desires James 1:19–20.

Here is what we often miss. Self-control is listed as **fruit of the Spirit** Galatians 5:22–23. It isn't a personality trait some leaders are born with. It is something grown in us as we walk with God.

Building internal strength

Think about rebar in a concrete structure. Rebar doesn't remove the pressure a wall has to bear. It gives the wall the structural integrity so it can bear it without breaking. A structure poured without rebar can look identical to one poured with it – same height, same finish, same shape – right up until the moment real weight is applied. Then the difference isn't cosmetic anymore. It's integral to the level of internal support. One structure holds. The other cracks.

That is the difference between generations, and it is the difference we've refused to look at honestly. Suppression never gave anyone rebar for their emotional "structure"; it just refused to acknowledge the structure was under pressure at all. And unrestrained expression hasn't given us rebar either. It has simply removed the structure's ability to hold the weight without immediately telling everyone it's cracking. Neither one has structural integrity.

> One is denial dressed as strength. The other is instability dressed as freedom.

Emotional regulation is like the rebar in your structure. It's not a secular add-on to a spiritual life. It is one of the clearest places our spiritual foundation shows up. With the rebar of Christ running through our lives, we will find an entirely different level of emotional maturity.

Recognising our load-bearing mechanisms

So why does pressure reveal what it reveals? Why does the same email, the same misread comment, the same ordinary friction produce wildly different reactions in different people, and sometimes wildly different reactions in the same person, depending on the day?

Because pressure doesn't create what surfaces. It only triggers it.

Every one of us carries an old story. Somewhere back in our history, something happened: an event, often small enough that no one else remembers; sometimes large enough that everyone does. Out of that event, we built a narrative about who we are. Not consciously. Not deliberately. A child doesn't sit down and reason her way to a belief about herself; she absorbs it in the moment, the way skin absorbs a scar. *I'm too much. I'm not enough. I'm invisible. I'm only valuable when I perform.* The event happens once. The narrative it produces runs for decades.

And buried inside that narrative is a protective – and still faulty – belief, because it's never the full truth. It's a conclusion drawn by someone too young, too hurt, or too overwhelmed to draw an accurate one. The protective belief feels true because it's ours. We built it. We've lived inside it long enough that it no longer feels like a belief we hold – it feels like the room we live in.

That belief then produces behaviour. Not randomly – predictably, almost mechanically. The colleague who goes silent under criticism isn't reacting to today's feedback; she's reacting to a decades-old conclusion that criticism means she's about to lose something. The leader who overexplains every decision isn't managing his team; he's managing a wound that once told him being misunderstood was dangerous. Pressure doesn't manufacture the behaviour. It just finds the wire already running from event, to narrative, to protective/faulty belief, straight through to whatever we do next.

This is why two people can sit under identical pressure and produce entirely different outcomes. It was never really about the pressure. It was about what pressure revealed – what was waiting beneath the surface of the current circumstance.

Which brings us back to the only two outcomes pressure ever produces:

CRACK *or* **BEAR · HOLD**

But now we can say it more precisely. Cracking is the faulty belief running the whole way to behaviour, uninterrupted, exactly the way it always has. Holding integrity under pressure is something interrupting that current before it reaches behaviour – long enough to ask whether the story underneath is even true. It's a pattern interrupt. That interruption is an intentional pause.

It's the space between what happens to us and what we do about it. And almost nothing in our culture, not the Silent Generation's silence, not our generation's oversharing, has taught us how to actually stand inside it.

The true strength of our ability to regulate shows up when we're under pressure. Like a concrete wall, it is tested by stress loading.

In our lives, there are four common pressure points, often coming at us at the same time from different directions.

PROFESSIONAL
The pressure of work, performance and provision, while adapting who we are to fit expectations.

EMOTIONAL
The pressure from our inner world, whether we feel safe with our feelings, and the weight of old wounds.

RELATIONAL
The pressure of staying connected without losing ourselves to pleasing, appeasing, opposing or resenting.

SPIRITUAL
The pressure of keeping our connection to God, and to our own soul, while living in a world that rejects what we believe.

For Christian leaders, that fourth point is constant. It sits under every boardroom decision and every hard conversation. It carries with you into every scenario.

STEPHEN: FEELING UNDER STRUCTURE

The clearest picture I know of bearing up under all four at once is Stephen Acts 6–7. He stands before a council that has already decided against him. False witnesses build a story about him until it hardens into "truth" in the room. His work, his relationships and his faith are all under attack, by people with the power to kill him.

He doesn't break. He doesn't fake calm either. He tells the truth plainly. And as the stones fall, his last words are forgiveness Acts 7:60.

That wasn't the absence of feeling. **It was trained character responding on cue: a response that had been rewritten into his character, long before he stood in front of that council.**

Most of us won't face pressure like that. But we face it at our size: the email that lands wrong, the meeting where we're misread, the colleague who threw us under the bus. And in that moment, what is inside is revealed.

From confession to repentance

Many of us live in a loop. We react, we feel bad, we confess, and we're forgiven. Then the same pressure arrives and the same reaction comes out.

Confession is essential. But confession names what happened. **Repentance changes direction.** On a spiritual level, building the structure to help regulate our emotions is the shift from confession to repentance: not just being sorry for the reaction, but being transformed so a different response becomes natural.

Paul calls this being transformed by the renewing of the mind Romans 12:2. It is gradual, practised, and done in partnership with the Holy Spirit. That's why trying harder in the moment rarely works. Research on self-control says the same thing: the people who regulate best rely less on willpower in the moment and more on habits they've built over time.

> What we rehearse in the quiet is what shows up under pressure. That is formation.

P.A.C.E.: How to Say It Well – a practice anyone can learn

P.A.C.E. is the framework I developed to help leaders build this structure. It is grounded in current research on emotional regulation, and every step has roots in Scripture.

P — PAUSE

Create space between the trigger and the response. *Be still and know that I am God* Psalm 46:10. The Psalms are full of *Selah*, a breath before the next line. Jesus regularly withdrew to pray before He acted Luke 5:16.

A — AFFIRM

Name what is happening, honestly, in yourself and in others. David asks his own soul why it is so downcast Psalm 42:5. He doesn't deny the feeling; he identifies it. Outwardly, we weep with those who weep Romans 12:15 before we try to fix anything.

C — CHALLENGE

Ask, "What is actually true here?" The story we tell ourselves in the heat of the moment is rarely the whole truth. Paul calls this taking every thought captive 2 Corinthians 10:5, and tells us to dwell on what is true Philippians 4:8.

E — ENCOURAGE

Strengthen yourself, and others, toward the right response. When everything fell apart at Ziklag, David strengthened himself in the Lord his God 1 Samuel 30:6. And we're told to encourage one another daily Hebrews 3:13, keeping communication safe rather than combative.

Practised over time, P.A.C.E. stops being a technique you remember and becomes the way you naturally respond. **Today's deliberate response becomes tomorrow's natural behaviour.** As a coach and trainer of leaders, I encourage you not to get stuck in a permanent learning curve, and abandon your aspirational changes in the face of the difficulty any new behaviour presents at first. (We're all walking, aren't we?) Practice should lead to transformation and become your new normal, natural way of responding, no matter the pressure.

Grace isn't just for church

For leaders, this isn't private. Emotions are contagious. Research shows that a leader's emotional state spreads through a room and shapes how a team thinks, decides and speaks up. Your people read your face before they read your strategy.

When a leader reacts, people learn to protect themselves. When a leader responds with structure, people learn it is safe to tell the truth. That is where trust, candour and good decisions live.

This is what it looks like to bring the fruit of the Spirit into the boardroom. Not a verse on the wall, but a leader who can hold their own emotions, and other people's, without being ruled by them.

If Thembo had just taken a breath, waited a beat, his response in that team meeting may have gone differently. Perhaps he would have been able to see things from Sophie's perspective when he affirmed her emotion. A great coach once said, when you name an emotion, it's like taking the air out of an explosive situation. When you remove oxygen from an object on "fire", the fire goes out – it has no air. Pause + Affirm = neutralising. The process immediately calms the space. Then Thembo could ask a question to gain clarity as he challenges Sophie's response, and end with encouragement, having owned his part in the situation. The overall outcome, when you apply P.A.C.E., will always be better – for you, your team, and ultimately the bigger purpose or mission.

Becoming people who can carry it

We don't need to go back to the stiff upper lip, and we don't need to stay on the pendulum swing. There is a third way, and it has always been God's way: to feel fully, and to be formed deeply enough to carry what we feel. To be able to hold an emotion and not allow it to injure – that is emotional regulation.

> Emotional regulation isn't about controlling yourself so others approve of you. It is about becoming the kind of person who can be trusted under pressure.
>
> It's about being the righteous and grace-filled person Jesus has called you to be.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

1 When pressure lands, which of the four pressure points do you feel first?

2 What does your most common reaction reveal about the old story underneath it?

3 Where are you stuck in confession, when God is inviting you into repentance?

4 Who around you feels the weather of your emotions most, and what do they need from you?

Say It Well.

— WHEN IT MATTERS MOST —

Building healthy relationships

● Pause ● Affirm ● Challenge ● Encourage

LEADERPRINT ACADEMY

Go deeper with P.A.C.E.

If this stirred something in you, you don't have to build this structure alone. *Say It Well: When It Matters Most* is a P.A.C.E. workshop from the LeaderPrint Academy. It is a practical, faith-integrated space to practise P.A.C.E. with other leaders and build healthier relationships at work and at home.

LAUNCHING IN 2027

Say It Well workshop →
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THE BOOK BEHIND P.A.C.E.

Stand Firm

Why we swung from suppressing emotion to expressing it, and how to build the inner structure that lets you hold steady under pressure. Available now.

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