

## Anxiety: Diagnosis & Defense

4/26/20

Even before the arrival and spread of COVID-19 the statistics regarding anxiety and depression in our culture were alarming. Among young people it's estimated that 1 in 3 teenagers will experience an anxiety related disorder this year. College mental health counselors have been overwhelmed the last few years by the number of students who come to them with these types of struggles. The suicide rate is increasing at an alarming rate among young people, particularly among girls.

And all of this was true before a global pandemic entered the picture. Now we have a whole host of extra issues to think about every day. Physical health and economic struggles are the two huge areas of concern that have been added to the mix. And there's no doubt that many, many people are facing feelings of anxiety and worry during this very unusual cultural moment.

I have no doubt that several of you are on edge and weighed down by anxiety right now. Here's the good news though, anxiety is not something that we just have to figure out on our own. The Bible gives us very clear instruction on this topic and helps us to learn how to deal with it. Now, of course, most Christians know that there are verses in the Bible that mention anxiety and tell us that we don't need to be anxious. So, there can be a temptation to think that if we just memorize those verses and recite them when we feel anxious that the anxiety will go away.

God's Word provides a much deeper and fuller picture of why we struggle with anxiety and a multitude of strategies for how to handle it. The Bible is always enough for us in every area of life. Let me remind you of this verse from 2 Peter 1:3.

So, this week and next week I want to show you how the Bible is sufficient for this struggle with anxiety and try to help you with specific strategies to fight it. You can see on the screen that the subtitle for this short series is, Diagnosis and Defense. This week we will diagnose anxiety and next week we will discuss some strategies to defend against it.

It's easy to want to jump to strategies and it's tempting for me to offer something like, 5 ways to be less anxious. But the reality is that most of us really don't understand anxiety very well at all. We experience it and we don't want it, so we just want to get rid of it.

In order to understand anxiety and worry I want to zoom out to a very big biblical doctrine and then zoom in to think about anxiety and worry specifically. This will be like learning the big picture of how a car engine works and then taking that overview and working on your own car.

There's a particular biblical teaching called Original Sin that we need to think about for a moment this morning. Sometimes we think of sin only in terms of something we consciously think or do to break God's law. We tend to think in terms of **sins** in the plural as individual actions or thoughts that we do or don't do.

But biblically speaking this is a woefully inadequate understanding of the way in which we have been affected by the stain of sin. The doctrine of Original Sin says that we have been bent out of shape and twisted since the moment of our conception. In Psalm 51:5 makes this clear as David explains that he was brought forth in iniquity.

Does this mean that God created people evil? No. Genesis is very clear that God created the natural order and mankind as very good. Man was free from the stain of sin and could accurately image God. But when Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and trusted him rather than God everything changed. They had chosen to sin and disobey but in that moment their NATURES were corrupted. The mirror had been cracked. It was natural to them to commit sin. It came quite easily from then on.

One of the realities you notice very quickly in Genesis 3 is how quickly and frequently Adam and Eve sin after the initial fall into sin. They blame each other and the serpent for their sin. Scripture says their eyes were opened. They didn't just commit a **sin**, but they were now **sinners**. It was their nature, quite normal, to commit sin. And they produce little sinners who find sin quite natural. Like a fish in water. We all know the story of Cain and Abel. Romans 5:12 says that death spread to all men because we all sinned in Adam. He is our Father and we were present in him when he sinned and so sinned along with him.

This natural corruption impacts all of us. Occasionally you will hear people take issue with the phrase "total depravity" as a description of our sinful condition. That phrase is not intended to teach that every person is completely incapable of being a nice person and will always sin in the most heinous way possible in every instance. The phrase means that we are depraved and corrupt in every portion of our being from our thinking to our desires to our emotions. Jeremiah 17:9. And we are born that way. Why does it seem that some sins are hard-wired into our personalities? Why does it seem so normal and easy for me to be moody and grouchy? Because sin IS hard-wired into my personality from birth.

So, why do I struggle with anxiety or why does it seem so natural for me to worry and fear? Because, as a Son of Adam or daughter of Eve, your soul was corrupted and bent out of shape. You don't function as you were originally intended to function. Now, this is not to say that every instance of anxiety is sin and that you are always choosing to sin when you experience anxiety. It is to say that your emotions have been bent and twisted by sin and now they don't function properly.

So, let's talk about emotions for a minute since anxiety is an emotion that we experience. Our emotions are God-given gifts for us to help us experience the world around us truthfully. You shouldn't try to ignore emotions. But since our emotions have been broken by sin they can be used in a positive or negative way. Your anger can be turned toward injustice and evil or it can be used against your co-worker because you didn't get what you wanted. Is it wrong to be angry? Depends. The emotion itself is not wrong. It becomes right or wrong based on the object of my anger and if my anger is rooted in faith in God or trust in self.

The God-designed emotion at the root of anxiety is vigilance. God has designed us to be concerned for others, vigilant and watchful. But when this emotion gets bent out of shape and when this emotion turns inward to self it becomes anxiety and worry.

Did you know that the root word for anxiety is used in both positive and negative ways in the Bible? Here are a couple of passages that are very familiar to us that speak about anxiety and worry. Philippians 4:6-7 and Matthew 6:25-34. It's clear in these passages that the emotions we experience of worry and anxious thoughts are negative and lack faith in God.

Here's the thing, did you know the same Greek word is used elsewhere in the NT but it is not used in a negative way but a very positive way?

In 1 Corinthians 12:24-25 the same word is used to speak of our concern for one another in the body of Christ. It's also used in the same book, Philippians 2:20, to speak of genuine concern for one another. So, what is the positive counterpart to sinful anxiety and worry? Vigilance or care and concern for others. It's an alertness that desires the good of another person. Remember in the garden how God told Adam to keep watch over the Garden and guard it? In fact, Adam failed to do his job and he let the serpent in the garden.

*"Vigilance is the God-given emotion that urges us to act quickly in response to a threat. Vigilance is the proper, constructive concern for the well-being of others and for the advancement of God's kingdom."* - Robert Kellemen

I want you to notice what he says in here about the well-being of others and the advancement of God's kingdom. Both of these are key aims in our lives. These are activities we must be intentional about. The well-being of others is love and that doesn't happen without genuine concern for others. So, anxiety is a perversion of our God-given concern for others and His kingdom. Here's Kellemen again:

*Anxiety is vigilance that is out of control. You continually scan your environment, worried about the what-ifs of life. Anxiety is toxic scanning. Anxiety is also vigilance that is trying to maintain control in a self-protective and self-sufficient way. Anxiety is vigilance minus faith in God."* - Robert Kellemen

So, if anxiety is vigilance minus faith in God then it is vigilance with faith in self or with fear so strong, we actually run from the circumstance rather than embracing the legitimate need that is there and acting according to God's Word to address it. Anxiety is vigilance where we try to handle the situation internally by worrying and going over every possible outcome to try to figure it out or control the situation.

If you have experienced anxiety this description resonates with you. It's constant scanning. It's hyper awareness. It feels like your thoughts circle around and around and the knots in your stomach get tighter and tighter.

So, there's a perceived threat out there. It may be physical, financial or relational. You may lose your job during the pandemic. You may get sick. Your loved one may

get sick. It's not wrong to be aware of a potential threat. God designed Adam in the garden to guard the Garden of Eden from the intrusion of the serpent. He was supposed to be vigilant. The question is, once I perceive that threat, what do I do with it? How do I respond? There are two paths in responding to a threat. You can respond with faith in God, which is exactly what Matthew 6:25-34 tells us to do, or you can respond with faith in self.

Now, I want this pandemic to end and for things to get back to normal as quickly as possible just like everyone else. But, let's not ignore the opportunity to learn how to better and more fully trust God through this time. Here's what I mean.

We are very used to being in control and taking care of ourselves. This pandemic has challenged the illusion of knowledge and control for all of us. None of us really knows exactly what to do and the best way to approach this situation. You probably have an opinion and that's fine, but none of us really know. This virus has defied normal medical knowledge in a lot of ways and the smartest medical minds are working to figure it out. What should government policy be? I don't know and neither do you. This situation is a prime opportunity to grow in faith. We have to humble ourselves and turn to God rather than self.

So, here's the question we need to ask ourselves in the midst of this. Is my first response to trust the Lord or to get angry and anxious because everyone and everything isn't seeing this the way I see it? In other words, do you turn to self or to God? Do you acknowledge your own personal human limitations and reach out to God in faith? Or, do you endlessly ask "what if" questions and try to gain control of the situation in your own mind?

A situation like this simply brings out what is already in my heart. There's an obvious threat happening on a number of levels including physical health and economic concerns. God designed us to respond to a threat with outward looking vigilance that trusts Him. The fall into sin has twisted that faith filled vigilance into self-centered anxiety and worry, which often expresses itself in anger rather than trust.

God never wastes circumstances. He is always working. My challenge to each of us today would be to let Him do His work of solidifying our trust in Him rather than turning inward to self.

So, hopefully this has been helpful for you in diagnosing anxiety and worry with a bit more clarity. Next week we will discuss some specific strategies in how to fight against this unwelcome guest. Let's pray.

## Sermon Reflection Questions

4-26-20

- Have the events of the last 2 months caused you any amount of anxiety or worry? How have you been addressing this?
- What are the implications of 2 Peter 1:3 for our approach to anxiety and worry?
- What does the doctrine of Original Sin teach? What passages help us to understand this doctrine?
- What is the difference between committing a sin and being a sinner?
- What does it mean that sin has impacted every portion of us?
- Are emotions good or bad? Explain your answer.
- How does anxiety relate to vigilance?
- So, how would you define anxiety?
- Why do you think the pandemic has caused increased anxiety and worry?
- Do you think you have responded with more faith in God or desire for control to this pandemic?