

Anxiety

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, just under 20% of people in the U.S. had an anxiety disorder of some sort in the past year. That's one out of every five people in this room. It's estimated that one out of every *three* people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their *lives*. Between 1997 and 2004, Americans more than *doubled* their spending on anti-anxiety medications like Xanax and Valium, from \$900 million to \$2.1 billion. Couldn't find much reliable data post 2004. But I read in one place that the amount spiked 34% during COVID *alone*.¹

And the data actually gets more concerning as you look at younger segments of the population. **Psychologist Robert Leahy pointed out recently that "...the average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s."**² Psychologist Jean Twenge wrote an article for the *Atlantic*, where she said, "it is not an exaggeration to describe [today's young adult generation] as being on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades."³

And I could go on, but I don't think I need to. The point I'm making—that I think most of us are already in agreement with—is that we have an anxiety *problem* in America. And none of that is intended to shame *anyone* over their struggle with anxiety. Whether you have a clinical diagnosis or not, on *medication* or not, anxiety is a real thing impacting millions upon millions of people. And I'm right there with y'all.

This has been a hard season for my wife and I. Our adopted son Luke is going through some behavioral issues where it's puzzling all the therapists he's seeing. And because of his issues, he's been kicked out of one daycare and on the verge of getting kicked out of a 2nd one. And most of the time if he's having a hard day, the daycare would call me at around noon if they need him to be picked up. So now on the daily, from 11:45a to 1:00p, my anxiety just kicks in because I'm dreading that potential phone call. My watch alarm actually goes off at times because my resting heart is above 120. Now for you it's probably not a phone call from a daycare you're dreading, it could be a phone call from a family member or maybe an ex. And maybe you experience the soaring heart rate *throughout* the day instead of certain times of the day like me. Maybe for you it manifests as nausea or chest tightness or antsiness, irritability. And even if you've never experienced anxiety yourself, chances are you'll either experience it in the future, or someone close to you will.

¹ From [this article](#).

² From [this article](#).

³ From [this article](#)

So this morning, I want us to talk about *anxiety*. I want us to dig into what the Scriptures say about it, about what *causes* it, and what to do *about* it. But as we do that, I want to make two important disclaimers. First, I want us to acknowledge up-front that the term *anxiety* is a very *broad* term. In fact, almost *unhelpfully* broad for someone like me who wants to give a teaching on the subject. **The National Institutes of Mental Health define an anxiety disorder as encompassing any of the following: panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia, specific phobia, social anxiety disorder, PTSD, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and separation anxiety disorder.**⁴ And that's just the things included in the definition of an anxiety *disorder*; it doesn't include any of us who *struggle* with anxiety but who might *not* be diagnosed with an anxiety *disorder* by a medical professional.

So I say that in order to acknowledge that probably, not *every single* thing I'm going to say this morning applies to every person with every one of those experiences. That would be a very difficult thing to do. Nor am I here to offer a silver bullet that will "fix" your struggle with anxiety. But I am going to at least attempt to talk about anxiety *broadly*, in such a way that *most* of what I say has some application to anyone struggling with it. And beyond that, I'm going to have to trust that the Holy Spirit, and with the help of your community, can help you sort through anything that may or may not apply to you. Make sense? That's my first disclaimer.

The *second* disclaimer is that nothing I say this morning is intended to *discourage* anyone seeking medical or medicinal *help* or *relief* for their anxiety. There are churches who would say things like "we don't need Xanax; we've got Jesus." Which just personally, feels like such a silly thing to say. Imagine me saying "I don't need Tylenol; I've got Jesus." Or "I don't need a car because I've got Jesus. Jesus take the wheel!" I think that really discounts the fact that God can work *through common grace, things like medicine*, just like he can work without it. So nothing I'm saying this morning is intended to discount or dismiss the helpfulness of medicine to cope with anxiety. Sometimes, medicine acts as a common grace gift from God to help alleviate some of the *physiological* symptoms of anxiety—such that we can think more clearly about it and get to the roots of it emotionally and spiritually.

But that does connect to a point I want to set before you this morning, that could be controversial to some. Which is that **anxiety is always at least spiritual**. It's always *at least* spiritual. Anxiety may be *just* spiritual; or it may be spiritual *and* physiological, psychological, environmental, and social situations. But it is always *at least* spiritual. So

⁴ From [this page](#).

in the same way that we shouldn't *dismiss* the medical and environmental component of anxiety, we also shouldn't dismiss the *spiritual* component of it either. In a lot of cases, you have to think about *both*.

So today I want us to take a look at what the Scriptures say about it, and see if they can bring us some help in navigating it. If you've got your bibles, turn with me to **Luke 12**. We're going to be pulling the bulk of what we say this morning from there and from Philippians 4, which we'll get to in a bit. But I want to frame up our time this morning in three parts: **the problems with anxiety**, **the source of anxiety**, and **the response to anxiety**. Doing my best attempt at a three-point Presbyterian sermon this morning. We'll see how it goes. But we're going to spend a bit of time on each. First, let's talk about...

The Problems with Anxiety

Let's start with our passage in Luke 12:22

22 Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear.

The word translated "worry," or in other translations, "*anxiety*,"⁵ is the Greek word *merimnaó* (*mer-rim-now*). Most literally, it means to be "divided into parts," or to be "pulled apart" in different directions. And to be honest, I can't think of a more descriptive word for the experience of anxiety. When we are anxious that is, at least *often*, how we feel. We feel like we are mentally and emotionally divided. Like our minds and hearts are being pulled apart into several or dozens of different directions at once. We become *preoccupied* with all of the things making us anxious.

Jesus says, "do not be *anxious*—do not be *merimnaó*—about your, quote, "*life*." Now, that's a pretty broad thing to not be anxious about, right? So then he clarifies: do not worry about your *life*, what you will *eat*; or about your *body*, what you will *wear*." Now, you might hear that and go, "okay—but that's not what I'm worried about. I'm not anxious about what I'm going to *eat* or what I'm going to *wear*." I'm worried about my *health*. I'm worried about my *relationships*. I'm worried about my *career*. I'm worried about being *single*. I'm worried about my *marriage*. I'm worried about my *kids*. I'm worried about my *retirement*. I'm worried about way bigger, more *existential* things than food and clothing."

But it's here that we need to understand some context about what Jesus is saying and who he's saying it to. The people Jesus is saying all of this to were, by and large, people who were living hand-to-mouth. Paycheck-to-paycheck. Everything they owned probably

⁵ See ASV, ESV translations.

fit in one room. Which is good, since most of their *homes*, if they had them, only *consisted* of one room. So the reason Jesus brings up food and clothing *isn't* because he thinks that's the only thing people ever worry about. It's because those were the things that *his particular audience* were worried about.

They were worried about food because they needed to figure out where tomorrow's food was going to *come from*. Or probably, where *today's* food was going to come from. They were worried about *clothing* because they probably only owned 1-2 items of it. And if something happened to it, if it ripped or wore out or got lost, they immediately had a problem on their hands. Those were the things people were most preoccupied, most anxious *about*, so that's what Jesus brings up. So **while Jesus only mentions food and clothing explicitly, I think his reasoning applies to most anything that we find ourselves anxious about.**

And with that established, Jesus mentions at least two practical *problems* with anxiety. First, he says this in v. 23:

23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.

The first problem with anxiety is that **anxiety truncates life**. Jesus is right: life *is* more than food, and the body is *more* than clothing. But anxiety would have us believe otherwise. Anxiety convinces us that life is as small as the thing we're anxious *about* at the moment. It truncates life down to that one thing. It gives us *tunnel* vision. If we're anxious about our career, that is all we can think about. If we're anxious about our kids, that is all we can think about. If we're anxious about our health, that is all we can think about. Anxiety takes away our ability to think about many of the things *other* than the thing we're worried about. Life is so much more than the things we're anxious about. But we tend to forget that in the middle of it all. Second, Jesus says this, v. 24:

24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!

And then he says something *similar* down in v. 27-30:

27 "Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 28 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! 29 And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. 30 For

all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

Here's the second problem with anxiety and it is a continuation of only focusing on your anxiety: **anxiety ignores God**. Specifically, it ignores God's *affections* and *provision*. In the middle of our anxiety, we tend to forget (or at least forget to operate *out of*) God's care for us. So in an effort to combat that, Jesus says "look at the *birds!* Do you see how they don't do anything to plant food or grow it, and God still gives them what they need?" "Look at the flowers, they don't toil or spin—they don't live in anxiety about what they're going to wear and how they're going to *make* or buy what they're going to wear—and yet God clothes them too." One thing we forget in our anxiety is the *care and provision* of God.

Now, it would be easy to *mishear* what Jesus is saying here. Some people hear those verses we just read and think Jesus is saying "look at the birds. Nothing bad ever happens to the birds! Look at the flowers—nothing bad ever happens to flowers!" "Look at the grass—nothing bad ever happens to grass!" Some people read this passage almost like it's Jesus' Bob Marley moment: *don't worry about a thing...every little thing is gonna be alright*.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying. For one, just read the *details* of the passage: Jesus says, and I quote, "if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and *tomorrow is THROWN INTO THE FIRE*." If Jesus wanted to tell everyone that everything was going to turn out great, it sure seems like he could've used less *fire* and *burning* in his metaphor. And let's just acknowledge that Bob Marley's freedom from anxiety didn't have anything to do with a knowledge of God's provision; and had everything to do with a *different* type of grass.

But that said, here's what Jesus is communicating. He's communicating that **God is attentive to the needs of his people**. If he provides for the needs of the flowers, grass, and birds—all of which are *not* human beings made in his image—how much *more* will he provide for *us*. How much more can he be trusted to meet our needs? Now, not all our *desires*, not all our *wants*, not all of our *preferences*—but certainly, all of our *needs*.

And then there's the third and *final* problem with anxiety. This one is by far the most *blunt*. Are you ready? **Anxiety is ineffective**. Put simply, anxiety doesn't *work*. Look with me at v. 25-26:

25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

The simple fact is that anxiety doesn't help anything. Worrying about something, in most cases, does absolutely nothing to resolve the thing that you are anxious about. Or, most of the time, even *impact* it in the least. **Mark Twain** famously said it this way:

I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.

How much time do you and I spend being anxious about things that never end up happening? For me, it's quite a bit. But here's the crazy thing: even when *some* of them *do* end up happening...me worrying about them did not help me deal with them in the least when they happened. "Sure," you might say, "but sometimes bracing for impact helps our ability to endure it when it happens." And that may be true, but it doesn't *stop* the impact from *happening*. And even more, what kind of damage are we doing to ourselves by walking around bracing for a dozen different "impacts" every week that may never end up happening at all.

A.J. Cronin was a Scottish physician who spent some time studying what people spent the majority of their time worrying *about*. Here, in a nutshell, were his findings: **Real, legitimate concerns** made up **8%** of people's anxieties. **Health-related concerns, 12%**. What he called **petty, miscellaneous concerns, 10%**. But notice these next two: **things that happened in the past and can't be changed** made up **30%** of people's anxieties, and **40% (!)** of people's anxieties were **future things that never happened**. It was no doubt this research that contributed to Cronin's now-infamous conclusion about anxiety:

Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, but only saps today of its strength.

Anxiety is *ineffective*. "Which of you, by worrying, can add a *single hour* to your life?" Answer? *No one*. None of us can. Because anxiety has never helped anyone do anything. It's never solved any problems, it's never helped us deal with life's sorrows; it has only *ever* hurt us. Anxiety saps all of our energy to where we are so exhausted that we feel like we can no longer experience any joy in life.

Suffering is when something makes you miserable. Anxiety is when you make yourself miserable.

So there are our problems with anxiety: **it truncates life, it ignores God, and it's ineffective**. But here's the issue: those are *logical* reasons not to worry. And at least most of us probably don't worry because we think it's a logical thing to do. Maybe some of us, but not most of us. *Most* of us could probably rattle off all the logical reasons we

shouldn't be anxious about the things we're anxious *about*. But that doesn't change the reality that we are *indeed anxious*. So let's move on to talking about...

The Source of Anxiety

I think Jesus gives us one simple-yet-profound statement in this passage that can help us discern and discover what the *source* of our anxiety is. You ready? Look with me at the last verse in our passage, v. 34:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The word *treasure* there more literally means *storehouse*. It referred to a place that a person stored away or kept safe anything *valuable*. And the *heart*, in the Hebrew understanding, wasn't just about a person's *emotions*. It referred to the seat of their entire *being*. Their thinking, their feeling, their will, their conscience—all of that. So knowing both of those things, here's what Jesus is saying with that statement, whatever you value *most*, there your heart will be also. And, interesting enough, whatever you value most in life is likely going to be the source of your greatest *anxiety* in life. So to reverse engineer that for our purposes, we could put it this way: what you are most *anxious about reveals* what you *value most*. Your *anxieties* are one way that your heart is trying to reveal what you care most about. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So if you want to make progress in addressing your anxieties, you need to trace them back to your treasure. And sometimes doing that is a process. A process that feels difficult. But I'll tell you the secret to it, and it's actually really simple. It's learning to ask the question, "**why?**" You know how kids sometimes will just ask the question "why?" over and over again? It's like the only method of torture that a toddler knows. Okay, basically we're going to do *that*, but in a helpful, (slightly) *less* torturous way.

Let me show you how this works. **Let's say that the thing you are most regularly anxious about is *money*. You're checking your bank account balance constantly, you're pulling your hair out every time you look at your budget—that's the thing in your life that is causing the most anxiety. So let's start there with the question *why*: *why* are you anxious about money? "Because my bank account balance is low." Okay, *why* is your bank account balance low? "Because I didn't budget well last month and spent money on unnecessary things." Okay, *why* did you spend money on unnecessary things? "Because I have trouble saying no to things I want." So now we're at the bottom of it: at least *some* of your anxiety, if that's all true of you, is due to a lack of self-control. The good news is that self-control is something you can *grow* in, with the Holy Spirit's help. In fact, like one**

of the top *seven* things the Spirit wants to generate in your life, according to Galatians 5. But by asking the question *why*, you can trace your anxiety back to its source, and then start to do something about it.

Let's do another one. Let's say that instead, the thing you are most regularly anxious about is your kids. You're constantly stressed about if they have what they need, if they're doing the things they're supposed to be doing, and *not* doing the things they're *not* supposed to be doing. So let's ask *why*: *why* are you anxious about your kids? "Well, because I'm nervous that they're not going to turn out the way they're supposed to turn out." Okay, *why* would that be a bad thing? "Well, because then it would reflect poorly on me." Okay, *why* would that be a problem? "Because it *matters* a lot how people think about me." Okay, but if you are doing everything you know how to do, and they still turn out poorly, *why* would it matter if people *thought* of you a certain way? "Well because it's *important* that people think well of me." So now we're to the source: the source at the bottom of a lot of your anxiety is your desire for approval and acceptance from other people. Which turns out, is another thing Jesus wants to set you free from! (See the teaching from two weeks ago).

Last one. Let's say you are super anxious about your work. Ok, why are you anxious about your work? My boss might not approve of my performance. Ok why is that important? I might lose my job. Ok, what happens after that. I won't be able to support myself and my loved ones. And if I don't do that, who is going to? So now we're to the source, that the source of your anxiety is you feel like you are the only one that can provide for yourself and your loved ones. That you are alone in this endeavor. By tracing your anxiety here, we now have good news. The bible speaks over and over again that God does care, and he will provide for you and those around you.

Now what I just did here in a couple minutes honestly often takes years of discipleship and growth and counseling and hard work, not to mention potentially medication to allow your mind enough clarity to do the hard work. It is not always this quick but this is how the human heart actually works though. Here is my main point: **if we view anxiety as primarily something to get rid of, we miss out on what it's trying to show us.**

The Response to Anxiety

So how do we respond to this then. If we are able to trace to the source of our anxiety, then what? What do we do about it?

Let's look at [Philippians 4](#)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. **5** Let your reasonableness[d] be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; **6** do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

It's interesting Paul here is encouraging the Phillipian church to rejoice in the Lord and then immediately follows up with do not be anxious. It's almost like our ability to experience joy in the Lord has a direct connection with our anxiety.

I think Paul here gives us **2** ways to respond to our anxiety. The first one is

Present your requests to God

Paul says present your request to God.

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Paul is saying cast your anxieties toward God. It's a very honest and raw prayer and interaction with God. A lot of times it can simply look like "God, here is this thing that's weighing me down. It feels crushing to me because I can't do anything about it. So I'm just gonna put it before you and let you worry about it because I can't do this."

To me this conjures up the image of a child who is scared and runs to their dad and snuggle up to them in a chair. Just to be held by their dad, to be comforted by him, to feel safe and know their dad is there with them. So perhaps the question here is: Do you see God as your Heavenly Father that desires this type of relationship with you? That he desires this type of vulnerability and to be there to comfort you?

When you feel overwhelmed, do you pull into yourself and isolate like a scared child sitting alone crying in the corner or do you look to your Heavenly Father and run to him instead and let him comfort you. Which one are you?

So there was a time in my life where I was completely free from anxiety. 100%. I don't remember ever being concerned about where my next meal was coming from. I don't remember ever being stressed out about if we were gonna have enough money to pay the rent or pay the mortgage. I don't remember ever freaking out about what was gonna happen tomorrow.

I was also three years old. And now you could argue that the reason I wasn't stressed out is because I hadn't been introduced to the brutal realities of life, right? That could be one argument, but I would argue there's a bigger reason than that. I wasn't worried about those things because I had someone taking care of me who was concerned about them.

And that's what Jesus says is true of God the Father. He says, you should not be worried like everyone else is worried because you have a dad who cares about you deeply.

Second thing Paul says how to respond to our anxiety.

Make Gratitude a regular practice

do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving

Notice Paul added a word to that stuff about prayer. He said 'prayer and supplication **with thanksgiving**.. Why? Why thanksgiving? Does it not feel impossible in the midst of your anxiety and try to be thankful? Can I let you in on something why it feels impossible? One prominent lie that your anxiety is telling you is that there is no way God will be there for you, will provide for you, will be there to catch you. ***In that moment we don't believe God can give us life apart from the things we are anxious about.*** So gratitude is actually a weapon against anxiety. It cuts down anxiety's ability to convince us that life is not found in our God.

So when Paul is telling us to go to God in prayer with thanksgiving, he's actually encouraging us to attack the lie of anxiety directly. That there is beauty and good in your life. And that good and beauty comes from your Heavenly Father. He is here with you right now. He does care about you. He will not forsake you.

So here is one practical way to live this out. A guy in my LifeGroup would put up 3x5 notecards all over his house of Philippians 4. Then he will pray with thanksgiving what he is worried about. So when he's worried about money, he thanks God for the job that God gave him. When he's worried about his job, he thanks God for all the abilities God has given him that allowed him to get a job in the first place. He seeks and finds the things he can be thankful for in the midst of the things he's anxious about. And look I'm not here saying just silver line things and ignore the things you're anxious about. I'm saying in the middle of your anxiety, combat anxiety with gratitude.

Romans 8 says

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us *all* things?

And I know a lot of us have heard this verse before. But let me help you hear it hopefully in a new way. Here is what Paul is saying. If God didn't even hold back his own son for you, doesn't it follow that he can be trusted to give you the things you need? If he did not withhold the most valuable and precious thing in the whole universe for you, what makes you think he's going to bail on you now?

So I think one of the loudest lies we hear in the midst of our anxiety is "I'm not gonna have what I need." If this happens, I'm not gonna have the things that I need.' But you see, in Jesus, God just saw to it that we don't have to wonder about that anymore. God proved at the cross that once and for all, He can be trusted to give us what we need. Maybe not everything we **want**, maybe not everything we **wish we had**, but everything we **need** has been provided in and through Jesus.

If Jesus in the midst of the most intense torture he experienced on the cross, did not abandon you but chose to stay on the cross for your sake, he will not abandon you in what you are facing right now. Church fam, do you know just how deep affection the God of the universe has for you? Do you know because of Jesus that the pride and smile that comes on your Heavenly Father's face when he looks at you? He is for you, he is with you.

So my prayer for our church family this morning is when anxiety starts to creep in, when life feels overwhelming, when you are faced with a problem that just doesn't seem like there's anyway there will be a solution for, in that moment, you have a friend in Jesus who is right there with you and promised he will never leave you, you have a Heavenly Father who holds everything together, the God of the universe, and that God is for you. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will let this beautiful truth will wash over you when you are faced with anxiety, and this truth will give you peace and rest, and a deep sense of joy knowing that everything will be fine because you are his beloved.