

The Problem with Anxiety: Part 3

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[0 : 00] So let's read together from James chapter four. We're going to read from verse 13 to 17.

This is God's word. Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow, we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there in trade and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life for you or a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes? Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance and all such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it for him, it is sin.

We have said for the past couple of weeks that anxiety is fear, a restless fearfulness of hypothetical circumstances of loss that we project into our futures.

[0 : 59] We play the profit and we imagine things we might lose, things we might never attain that we had always hoped, or things we might do or not do in a future that does not exist.

We read that back into the present and it makes us fearful. That fear becomes fearfulness over time. We have this activity of restlessness in our heart, what used to be called angst.

It manifests both as sickness and soul and body. So oftentimes we know we're anxious because we first feel it in the sweaty palms and the burning sensations and the pins and needles and the stomach aches and the heartburn and the bathroom trips or whatever it might be.

That can snowball over time and get worse and worse and worse and literally eat us up from the inside out both physically and spiritually. We said last time that because we are modern people, we are created or raised in our environment to be individualist.

And in an individualist culture, all of us are called to form and create our identities in ways that people in earlier centuries never had to do. So if you've ever been asked the question or you've ever asked the question of a child, what do you want to be when you grow up?

[2 : 21] Then it shows that you're an individualist, you're a modern individual. We all are because we are called in this culture to curate our identities, to develop our identities by choice.

And when choice is maximized, we're much more prone to anxiety because we have to determine our own existences, our identities, our successes, and we're much more prone to failure in that circumstance.

And so those are the things we've been talking about. The last thing we did last time was to introduce the first theological habit for a peaceful heart as I'm calling it. And that theological habit which we're going to talk more about today is what Jesus says.

He says, do not be anxious instead, look at the birds or look at the lilies. Look at the birds and look at the lilies, meaning look out and know that God is absolute and you are contingent.

God is in total control of all things and you're not. And it's actually a call to do theology, to talk to your heart about God.

[3 : 24] So whenever the first habit of a theological habit, pursuing a peaceful heart over time, is to whenever fearfulness strikes and restlessness strikes to immediately get habituated into saying to the heart, this is what God is like.

Remember again that this is God, you're not God, you're not in control. That's Jesus' command from Matthew 6. We're going to tonight look at one more habit, really two more.

But before that, I want to think a little bit more with you about theological habits, this phrase I'm using, theological habits for the peaceful heart. And what I've tried to do here is crunch about 90 minutes of material on this page into 30 minutes.

And so I've kind of just made it into six points that just kind of grow logically on each other. So we're going to go through them briefly tonight. So here's the first.

The first thing as we will pause on the idea of anxiety, concept of anxiety for a moment, we'll come back around to it at the end. Just think first about habits and how habits work on us and why habits are so important for fighting anxiety.

[4 : 34] First thing, one, the heart, the Bible teaches us that the heart is plastic, like the neurosciences tell us the brain is plastic. So one of the things that's been very present in the neurosciences the past however long, I'm told, I have no expertise in this.

I'm told is that scientists are discovering more and more about the plasticity of the brain, meaning that we actually have the capability as humans to rewire our brains, to create different neural pathways through habits, through thoughts, through actions, over time, through medication, through the foods we eat, all sorts of ways.

And that's similar to the way the Bible actually presents the soul. The soul is also plastic, not meaning that, well, it's prone to love money and cars and big houses, but not that meaning of the term plastic, meaning it's malleable.

The brain is malleable and the soul is malleable. Thomas Aquinas is one of the great theologians of church history. And in the Middle Ages, he presented a quick little synopsis.

It's not quick in his book, but you can present it quickly. The quick little synopsis of the construction of the soul, of what the soul is like, which is a big question and a hard one to answer.

[5 : 56] But he said that we can be pretty confident about a few things. One, that the soul contains what he called a vegetative appetite, that there's a vegetative component to our souls.

In other words, we have instincts that are completely involuntary. Like our soul desires things. We have drives.

And our soul working alongside our bodies creates a drive for hunger. And you don't really control that. When you get hungry, you get hungry, and it's pretty involuntary.

So he talked about how there's involuntary aspects to our soul. But then on the flip side, there's completely voluntary aspects to who we are, like our decision making.

We think about something that we're going to do, and we decide, well, this is what I'm going to do, and we go and we do it, make a choice. So there's voluntary aspects. And then he talked about the space in between what he called the sentient appetites in his fancier terminology.

[6 : 54] But it's just the space in between voluntary aspects of the life of our soul and involuntary. And they're in between, meaning what goes into this space both can be controlled, but is also hard to control.

It kind of brings the involuntary and the voluntary together, meaning you can control it, but it's really difficult. And the big thing that he stuck into that category is the emotional life, our emotions.

Our emotions are malleable, but also difficult to control. They're not like thoughts where you can put them away quickly.

You tend to not be in control of your emotions in the immediate, but you can change your emotional life over time. So that's where Aquinas put them.

And that means, that's very important because we said last time that in addition to saying anxiety is fearfulness in the soul about hypothetical circumstances of loss in the future, we said that is also to say anxiety is an emotion.

[8 : 01] Fear is an emotion. Fearfulness is an emotive state. And so anxiety is an emotive condition. And so Aquinas is saying to us there that the heart, the soul, the place where we experience anxiety is malleable, but it's also very difficult to change at the same time.

It can be changed, but it's not easy to change. And so Aquinas jumped straight from there to say, that's what the Bible is talking about when it says the fruit of self-control. Self-control is hard to acquire because it pertains to emotion and behavior.

But it can be gotten over time. And it's part of the process of the theological we use, the growth over time of our emotional life, of our active life sanctification, the term that the Bible uses.

All right, that's the first thing. The second thing, to build on top of that, to get a little closer to habits is then there's real urgency or appropriateness or a real call from both the Bible and Christian history for us as modern people to recover theological habits.

The modern term for this is spiritual disciplines, but the older term that people used to use was the rule of life. You see that little phrase, the rule of life pop up in older texts that come from Christian thinkers and Christian writers.

[9 : 33] And the rule of life simply described always seeking better daily and weekly rhythms organized by Christianity, organized by the fact of the gospel, seeking better daily and weekly rhythms organized by the fact of the gospel.

Now, if you pick up any productivity book at Waterstones or wherever, they are going to have some... The best ones out there are going to have some section that basically is a secularized, non-religious view of the rule of life.

Because almost everybody that writes in the productivity world has realized that something like the rule of life is incredibly important in all sorts of ways. So one writer that's very popular that you can go by at Waterstones, he talks about it as what he calls keystone habits.

And he says, keystone habits are small micro changes in your daily life that make macro changes over time, that produce big effects 10 years on, 20 years on, 25 years on, that slowly change you over time.

And this is the same idea that's shown up in religious history too, because it's real, because God actually made us like this. He made us to grow over time like this.

[10 : 56] And theological habits for the Christian are incredibly important for getting there. David Foster Wallace is the famous author that died around 2010, died very young.

He's known, you might have heard of him for his famous Kenyan college address. But he has a little speech where he gives an old hat, silly example to make this point.

He says, two young fish, two young fish were swimming and they met an older fish. And the older fish said, morning boys, how's the water?

And the two young fish, of course, said, what is water? And David Foster Wallace comments, he says, the most important realities are often the ones in our lives that we're not aware of.

We're all living according to a specific regimen of daily habits and those habits shape most of our life. You know, so one of those daily habits that maybe we haven't, we don't think about too much, but it does pop up into our minds at the end of the week every week when our iPhones or whatever phone you might have tells you what you've done is the amount of average time every day you spend talking to somebody in person versus the amount of average time you spend scrolling.

[12 : 15] And then, you know, your iPhone, they gave us this feature and you have to choose, I want to know how many hours I've spent every week on this thing. My phone tells me every week how much worse I've done than the last week at my amount of scrolling time, right?

This is, that's a habit and it's unconscious because it's not something that I'm specifically making a plan for to do, to change or to do better at.

And so, so much of our spiritual life, our unconscious life, the life of our soul is actually formed through habits, through media that we ingest, through ideas that we ingest, through the way we treat objects in our lives that are not planned by us.

We're receiving them and they're changing us. And so, one of the things to end this point that has been talked about a lot throughout history is the difference in theological education and real spiritual formation.

You know, if you've been in the church any time, you know, very well that there's a huge difference between being educated about Scripture and actually having your spirit shaped to love God, that those are different things.

[13 : 34] And ideally they go hand in hand, but the former theological education only becomes healthy spiritual formation typically when we have healthy spiritual habits standing in between theological education and the formation of our spirits.

All right, let me just rattle this off and get back to anxiety. There's a recent book from a guy named Justin Early, or Yearly, I'm not sure how to pronounce it, where he talks about renewing the rule of life, the old rule of life, but in modern terminology for modern people in a way that makes sense for us in the 21st century.

And so he takes a lot of the things, the best things that you see practiced over the Christian centuries and adapts them. And this is more general and not directly pertaining to anxiety, but I just want to read these off to you because I think they're really good.

This is what he says. He gives the daily rule of life for modern people, pray three times a day on your kneeling. This is just his prescriptions.

Pray three times a day kneeling, have a meal every day with another person or more people than one focused on them, asking them questions.

[14 : 51] One hour with the cell phone and all screens turned off during your waking hours, and the rule is touch scripture before you touch your phone.

So those are his four daily habits for the modern rule of life. And then here's his four weekly. One hour of an intentional meeting with a developing friend, a Christian friend, a plan to curate your media intake.

So determining this is how many hours I'm willing to watch of Netflix, and this is the shows I'm willing to spend my time on. And these are the rules for things I'm not.

Fasting from something you love for 24 hours during a seven day period, and a firm commitment to worship, corporate public worship and Sabbath rest. That's an example.

All right, point three. I bring up that overall generalized topic of theological habits of the rule of life, of being trying to grow into that a little bit more, to say that theological habits for a peaceful heart, this phrase I'm using, is essential, I think, to the way the Bible prescribes the fight against anxiety from a Christian perspective.

[16 : 05] As we know, we said this week one, are not promised in this life unbroken psychological tranquility.

We know that the Bible says for Christians, the heart will be vexed, anguished, suffer disturbed, grieving, fearful, a host of all sorts of emotions throughout our life.

The promise, rather, well, the promise is from one place, Romans four, when it describes the life of Abraham.

Paul describes the life of Abraham, and it says, in hope, he believed against all hope that he could become the father of many nations. And in other words, it's saying that every single circumstance that Abraham walked through in the Abraham story pointed in the opposite direction of the promise.

If you read through the Genesis story of Abraham. And yet, in hope, he believed, he had hope, which gave him a peace at heart in the midst of waves crashing on him from the outside all the time.

[17 : 13] And so the promise of sanctification, the promise of growth in this is not utter psychological tranquility in this life, nor is it to get out of hard circumstances. Rather, it is hope and a peace of Philippians four that surpasses understanding.

So that famous passage in Philippians four that talks about anxiety, cast your cares upon him because he cares for you. And the Holy Spirit has the power to give you a peace that surpasses understanding, meaning it's possible to grow over time into a piece that is surprising peace.

That is a piece that does not make sense. It surpasses understanding, meaning it's hard to understand how a person could have peace in the midst of what they might be walking through. All right, so that's the biblical promise.

All right, four and four, five and six, as we start to draw things to a close is just to come back to anxiety and say something about the second habit that I want to introduce.

Really habits two and three. All right, habit one was look at the birds, spiritual habit. Look at the birds, meaning as soon as fearfulness creeps in anxiety, the early stages of anxiety, you've got to make it a habit to talk to your heart about God and about the power of God.

[18 : 35] The second habit comes from James four, 13 to 17. We read it at the beginning and Tim Keller, when he's reflecting on this passage, he puts it this way that we have to be habitual, make it a habit of saying Lord willing, Lord willing.

Now, actually, I meant to ask Derek this, but we have this kind of old, I'm from the South in the US and we have this kind of old joke about how Southern Christians always say Lord willing after everything, you know, we say, I'm going, I'm going out, I'm going to the shop, Lord willing, I'll be back in 30 minutes, whatever.

I'm not really sure if that's a thing here or not. And we're sort of talking about that, except you don't have to say it all the time out loud, but you can think it in your soul and in your heart.

That's exactly actually what James literally commands through God, through James commands right here in this passage. Because in this passage, what's happening is he's talking about making plans and thinking about your future.

And we said that anxiety is thinking about the future, hypothetical future and imagining circumstances of loss that don't exist and reading those back into your life at the present and growing in fearfulness about those.

[19 : 49] And so James is addressing that very directly here. He's saying, as you are making plans, you better say Lord willing, because most of our anxiety has to do with thinking about the future, asking questions like, what if I lose this or what if I never get this or what if I do this or what if I never do this?

These are the types of questions that can be asked of the objects that our anxiety is focused on. And that's exactly what James is dealing with here now. In verse 13 to 14, just very quickly, he says, come now you who say to dare tomorrow we're going to go and we're going to do such and such and such and such a town and spend a year there and we're going to trade and we're going to make a profit.

Yet, you don't know what tomorrow will bring. It's very similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 6 about do not be anxious, look at the birds, you just don't stop thinking about tomorrow because today has enough trouble.

You don't know what tomorrow is going to bring. It's very similar here and here just to point out, James is talking about something very normal making plans and he's talking about how people haven't really changed from then to now because the example he gives is you say over the course of the next year I'm going to go to the market and I'm going to trade and I'm going to make such and such profit.

So he's saying people in the first century struggle with the same things people in the 21st century do and that's saying I want to be this successful, I want to make this much money as an example of one of the things that we might be anxious about projecting success into the future.

[21 : 23] And then he says in verse 14 to 16, you don't know what tomorrow is going to bring, what is your life? It's a vapor picking up on the Ecclesiastes language and he says instead you've got to say, you ought to say if the Lord wills we will do this or that.

So to bring it together, when we become anxious it's because we're thinking about the future and what the Bible does is it does not say, well stop thinking about the future altogether.

It's saying how is it that we should think about the future? How is it that we should make plans? How is it that we should project hypothetical circumstances into the future? And it says you've got to be conscious of God as you make plans.

You've got to say as you make plans I hope to do this but only if the Lord wills. In other words, the negative side of that is he's saying he's attacking the great sin of what's been called in the past God-forgetfulness.

And it's a sin that all of us struggle with, God-forgetfulness. It's going on about in your daily existence and not having a consciousness of God, of who you really are, of who made you, of who saved you, of where you've come from and of where you're going.

[22 : 39] It's the sin of God-forgetfulness and the sin is this. It's saying I made plans for this week, I made plans for this day, I made plans for my life, my career, my relationships, who I was going to be, who I was going to be with, who I would never be with, who put your struggles into that picture.

And it's when we forget to say in that, well, those are my hopes but only if the Lord wills. And I've got to be prepared habitually over time to conform myself to the Lord's will because I just don't know what he is going to do with my life.

I don't know what he is going to choose in the path of my life. Psalm 9 talks about this. It says, the Lord is known by his justice, the wicked are sent to the grave, and all those who are judged who forget God.

And so Psalm 9 takes this sin that every human is prone to and maximizes it and says, there's a way of forgetting God so often that you ultimately forget God.

And James is coming to us in the midst of this gospel book, the book of James, and saying, there's very good news here. And that's, as you think back on it today and think, man, all the times in my life, in my day to day, and last week where I determined my schedule and made my plans, and I did not think about the living God in any of it.

[24 : 02] I didn't say if the Lord wills, I forgot about God. The good news for us today is that for all the times that we've forgotten God, God in the gospel did not forget us.

And the coming, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's pronouncement to the world that says, I know you forgot me, and that's why I've come because I would not forget you, no matter how many times you break the covenant, no matter how many times you forget to say, if the Lord wills, I will come for you nevertheless.

And so in love, he reaches out and says that in grace, you're forgiven, and in the hope of growth, renew your spiritual habit of saying every single moment you make plans, if the Lord wills, you don't have to say, Lord willing, like I was, grew up here and all the time, but you've got to say it in your heart, you've got to make it part of your plans.

And so that's the secret. Look at the birds, talk to your heart about God. Habit two is be God conscious in all your plan making, both daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and in who you want to become, what you want to become over time.

All right, five and six, which are very short, just a few minutes, some will be finished. Five and six, five is really just to say this, that these together start to form up theological habits for a peaceful heart, habit one, habit two.

[25 : 28] Look at the birds, do theology, talk to your heart about God, be immersed in who God is that helps and then be God conscious throughout your daily life of that God who is as you make plans.

And so the fifth is just to call you to an orient to renewing an orientation and a posture or picking up an orientation and posture in your life of trying to actively seek spiritual disciplines.

Making this year, it's still early 2022 a year of spiritual disciplines. Making your daily planning, one way to do this, turn your daily planning, if you like to make lists, I've taken over this room up here is my office here and I have little sheets of paper all over it with lists and I like to make lists of what to do for the day.

Make your daily list into prayer. So as you write it, pray it, turn it over to the Lord and say if the Lord's wills because this is to recognize, to believe that everything that you have at the moment as you make plans is of God's grace and everything that you're going to do and be successful at is of God's grace and that God is of total control right now as I make my plans and I don't possess God's incommunicable attributes and so I can't ultimately control how any of this is going to go and that over concern about all of it is going to lead me towards anxiety and so I've got to be God conscious in this moment as I think through these things.

Alright, that's five, six. I'll close today by just giving a third habit and it's just to point out both here and in Matthew six, there's a real emphasis on focusing on today, not tomorrow.

[27 : 18] So we have to make plans, we have to think through our futures with wisdom but there is this biblical theme of actually being more concerned about today than tomorrow.

You see Jesus say to Matthew six, the passage we've read the last two weeks when he says, don't worry about tomorrow. Today has trouble in itself. Focus on today.

And then we see it again here in this passage. What's your life? You're a myth that appears for this time. You don't know what tomorrow is going to bring focus on today. So there's this theme.

We've got to make plans, we've got to be wise about our scheduling and at the same time sometimes the focusing on the future can become the enemy of the present and we might miss opportunity today.

Today is the day God's called us to love God and today is the day God's called us to reach out for an opportunity to talk to somebody about the gospel and today is that day.

[28 : 19] We have no idea what tomorrow will bring but we do know what God calls us to be and to do today. And so there's this real emphasis on today. Jonathan Pennington is a New Testament scholar and he's got a book on some of the gospels and one of the things that he talks about is the Lord's Prayer also in the same chapter is Do Not Be Anxious in Matthew.

And actually he says that from other scholars that in the original text, the Greek text that stands behind it, there's an implication that the word today should be present in most of the clauses.

So we pray our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, that will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And then there's the word give us today, our daily bread.

And then he says, and the implication then follows, forgive us today, our debts as we forgive our debtors, those who have sinned against us today.

And lead us not into temptation when today and deliver us from the evil one today. There's this implication that actually the Lord's Prayer is a daily prayer because it's reorienting us and saying today is the day to love the Lord.

[29 : 35] Today is the day to serve God. Today is the day to remember that the gospel stands and I'm forgiven for yesterday. So yesterday is gone. And I don't know what the future is going to hold. So I've got to focus on today.

And that doesn't prevent us from making plans, but it focuses our hearts on ministry and spiritual habit and work and the things that we were made for in the present day today.

Every day remember that God is the ground of all being in existence and grace and gifts today and that can really be a help, I think, in fighting anxiety over time.

Let's pray. Father, we ask, we pray, we pray, as you taught us, we say, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your kingdom come and your will be done on earth in the way that it is done in heaven.

And we say, give us this day our daily bread and forgive us today our debts and help us to forgive others. Lord, who might have sinned against us this day.

[30 : 35] And today we ask that you would help us to flee from temptation as the day goes on towards bed our bedtime and that you would help us to resist the temptations of the evil one today.

We pray we pray these prayers Lord and we pray ultimately in all this that you would have glory and we pray the specific focus free us from our anxieties today.

We cast our cares upon you because you care for us today. Today is the day that you are giving us oxygen and upholding our bodies and giving us life and breath and grace and gospel promises.

And so we rest in you today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.