

Understanding Emotions Part 2 Anxiety, Loneliness and Guilt

Pastor Tom
February 10, 2019

We all want to move forward in life. We hope to progress, grow, succeed and take the next step – whether that be at school, work, relationships, marriage, parenting and retirement. But there is something that can hinder our progress. It can derail good planning, undo hard work, fracture relationships and even damage property. I have seen it cause the end of long time friendships. I have seen people lose their jobs over it. I have seen marriages end because of it.

What is it? Emotional immaturity. Now we expect some emotional immaturity from 2 and 3 year olds. They're just learning to deal with life and the reality limitations to their wants. They respond to a "no" in a variety of creative ways. They might cry, yell, scream, pout, throw themselves on the floor, throw things, throw their brother, color the wall with crayons or whine away in an attempt to get what they want. You especially see this kind of behavior in toy stores.

I remember we often regretted taking our kids through toy stores when they were toddlers. Before they went in, they might be blissfully unaware of all the toys they don't have. But upon entering the store, they are suddenly exposed to multiple reasons for discontent. Then when they found out we were not buying at least one toy from each aisle, they would leave in a bad mood. But we kind of expect that from 2 and 3 year olds. As parents, we are called to train our children to grow in emotional maturity. We need to teach them that the real world contains limits that prevent us from getting everything we want.

But there are often areas in our lives where we don't grow up emotionally. Or we fail to understand our emotions so it's almost like we can't control them. Or we might not understand reality, the world or the good boundaries God has put in place to help us navigate it. So this lack of understanding can lead to emotional immaturity and constant obstacles that prevent us from moving forward.

So today, we are going to continue in our quest to understand our emotions from the book of Proverbs. I pray that today's message will be another piece to help us grow in God's wisdom. This all comes in the series "Understanding our hearts" from God's perspective especially in the book of Proverbs. (If you missed one of these messages, they are all available on the website in written and audio form). Last week we learned some general principles about our emotions from the Proverbs.

We learned:

- Emotional well-being is interconnected with the whole person.

- Without physical health, life is hard. Without emotional health, life is unbearable.
- Some tragedy and sadness is part of everyone's life.
- A wise heart can lead to cheerful emotions; a foolish heart can lead to crushed emotions.

Today, we're going to deal with 3 specific emotions – anxiety, loneliness and guilt. With each one we will define what we're talking about, consider a Proverb that speaks to it and then look at ways to deal with these emotions in a healthy way. You can turn to Proverbs 12:25 to prepare.

Let's start with anxiety. Anxiety has become a very prominent issue in our society today. When I looked up definitions for anxiety, there are two major categories of them. Definition one comes from Psychiatry and/or Psychology. **Anxiety is "a relatively permanent state of worry usually accompanied by compulsive behavior or panic attacks."** Let's call this Type 1 Anxiety. When people say they struggle with anxiety, this is usually what they are talking about. It is no small thing in their lives. It is not something they can just get over or stop. Notice it's relatively permanent. So it's ongoing, constant or at least shows up semi-regularly in their lives. It's also part of several mental disorders which lead to life challenges. Compulsive behavior or panic attacks show up physically in the body. Remember last week's first principle. Emotional well-being is interconnected with the whole person. Well if someone suffers severe anxiety, it can result in significant physical problems. Some people here today have experienced this kind of anxiety in varying degrees.

The second definition goes like this. Anxiety is "**an unpleasant emotion experienced before or during a stressful situation.**" Let's call this Type 2 Anxiety. I think everyone experiences this kind. We may get anxious about final exams or how our presentation will be received. We may get anxious about some conflict or a phone call from the doctor's office saying we need to come in. In fact even the Apostle Paul admitted his own struggle with anxiety. In 2nd Corinthians 11:28, he talks about "the deadly pressure on him and his anxiety for all the churches." So I think we all experience that kind of anxiety.

If you have never experienced Type 1 anxiety, you can conclude people who say they have anxiety are talking about type 2 anxiety – the vague unpleasant emotion. You may find it hard to understand why they can't just get over it like you can. But remember emotional well-being is interconnected with the whole person. Their anxiety likely connects to other pieces of them or past experiences you don't know about. So this calls for patience and some understanding on each other's part.

But now I'd like to consider another definition of anxiety that comes from the Hebrew Word used in Proverbs 12:25. I think this can help us address both Type 1 and Type 2 anxiety. **The Hebrew Word for Anxiety means "the emotional distress caused when something vital to your life is threatened.** Now that definition opens doors to possible ways to address anxiety. We of course experience anxiety if someone threatens our lives and the vitality of our life must continue for us to live. But sometimes what we think is vital to our lives might not actually be vital.

I'm thinking about things like whether or not we get the number of "likes" we hoped for in our post. I'm thinking of perfectionism, people-pleasing or approval addiction. For the perfectionist, it is vital that life goes perfectly. So when our perfect plans or the perfect situation unravels, it threatens our perfection expectation. So we experience anxiety. But why would anyone adopt perfectionism? Brene Brown writes "Perfectionism is very addictive because it is very seductive. It's so great to think, 'there's a way I can do things where I can never be held in judgment by other people, that I can totally escape criticism.' But it doesn't work." Or maybe we believe as long as life is manageable we're ok. But when life gets overwhelming, we freak out. Or maybe we need to be in control. But then something comes along that we can't control and we experience anxiety. Or maybe we learned that pleasing people is the way to keep peace in life. But then someone comes along that is not easily pleased. So we're forever trying to please them. It doesn't seem to help. So our anxiety goes up. Each one can seem vital to our lives. But if we step back and look at things from God's perspective, we learn what's really vital.

So one part of addressing anxiety involves **Examining our heart attitude towards the thing threatened.** When we get anxious, we need to step back and ask ourselves what troubles us. Sometimes we may discover that we're elevating something as vital when it's really not. Our world tells "this is vital" or "that is vital". "You need the latest phone; the latest fashion or the latest look. Otherwise you're just not with it." Well, a lot of people actually don't have any of these and seem to be getting along in life just fine. Or we may have to make adjustments in our lifestyle because of a change in our financial position. We may think it's the end of the world. But it's not. We need to think back to how God has cared for us in the past and seen us through. We also need to remember God holds our future in His hands.

Another piece to the puzzle of anxiety is found in Proverbs 12:35. **Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. When anxiety comes, don't deal with it alone. (Proverbs 12:25)** Anxiety in a person's heart certainly weighs them down, but a good word makes them glad. Where does the good word come from? We need

others to relate their own experiences, point us to God or just be there so we don't feel alone. When we're struggling, we might need to let others know about it so they can pray and encourage.

One of the most prescriptive passage in the Bible about dealing with anxiety is **Philippians 4:6-7** – “Do not be anxious about anything. But in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” **Prayerfully hand over your anxieties, burdens and worries to the Lord.** Write a list of that which worries you. Then present it one item after another to the Lord. Invite Him into the situation. Ask Him to act. Then entrust it to Him. Notice the promise that accompanies this command. The peace of God – the peace that God Himself enjoys – which surpasses understanding – a peace that is beyond human understanding or a peace that happens when there's no human reason to be at peace – will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. That is what we need to break the cycle of anxiety. Instead of focusing on that which worries us, we need to focus on the God who rules over the universe with unimaginable power. With our eyes fixed on Him, there is a greater likelihood of our experiencing His peace.

Now let's talk about **loneliness**. There's a difference between being alone and feeling alone. One dictionary defines loneliness as “**sadness resulting from being or believing you've been forsaken or abandoned.** To be forsaken or abandoned can be devastating. But I don't think it even has to be that drastic to experience loneliness. It can come just by being ignored or left out or not being understood. Proverbs 14:10 address this. Proverbs 14:10 speaks to this. **Proverbs 14:10 - Each heart knows its own bitterness and no stranger shares its joy.** This saying observes the reality that no one can fully know the joys and sorrows of another human being. No one has experienced life exactly like you have. Certain feelings both joyous and sorrowful cannot be communicated to others, no matter how much sympathy and understanding they have. We can identify to some extent with one another's joys and sorrows. But such sensitivity has its limits. So we must never assume we can absolutely predict or understand the behavior of another person. You may guess wrongly what they think, what motivates them or why they have such strong feelings. So we need to show grace towards others. They have their own sorrows and joys to share.

But this also implies that if we experience lonely feelings, we cannot expect other people to read our minds. If we don't want to be terribly lonely, we have to be open up and reveal ourselves a bit. We have to gain courage to maybe share some of ourselves and some of our experiences. It's true that many people have no time for that. They may view

us mostly as a commodity to see if we are any use to them. But when you find someone that actually listens and has patience, take a risk to share a bit. Hopefully this body of believers can be at least one place where people can come and lose some of their loneliness.

But ultimately, only God really understands us. Only the Lord knows all the thoughts of our hearts. He knows us better than we know ourselves. So we must connect with Him constantly. We must hear from Him through His Word and in prayer. He is the only who can be with you through everything you have to face in life – even dying. One author puts it like this. “Jesus walked through death for you and now only He can take you by the hand when you walk through the ultimate dark place, the door of death.” Psalm 23:4 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because the shepherd Lord is with me.” The only way to avoid terrible loneliness is to spend more and more time with the Lord. So **Address Loneliness by fellowship with others and God.** Share yourself with others. Share much with God.

The third emotion we will deal with today is guilt. **Guilt is remorse caused by feeling responsible for some offense.** Or “a feeling of deep regret usually for some misdeed.” Now I think there is such a thing as false guilt and true guilt. False guilt occurs when we feel remorse for something we didn’t do. That can happen when we misinterpret a situation and conclude we’re responsible for the hurt caused. So we may tell a joke in a social setting and someone gets up and rushes out of the room with no explanation. We may conclude the joke offended and hurt them. So we feel guilt and go talk with them. But we discover they felt sick to their stomach and had to rush to the washroom. So their leaving had nothing to do with our joke. That’s false guilt.

But the harder kind of false guilt comes when someone accuses us of some misdeed or causing some pain. We’re unsure if it’s a true accusation. Maybe a couple struggles in their marriage over some expectations they had of each other that were never met. They have some teenagers. One day one of the parents gets really frustrated about the whole situation. Then one of their teenagers gives them attitude. The parent blurts out “if only you’d cooperate more, none of this would be happening.” The teenager’s lack of cooperation may be a factor of stress in the home. But it’s not the primary reason for marital strife. Yet the teenager can suddenly feel guilty for everything going wrong. That kind of false guilt is harder to discern. The Bible doesn’t instruct us to accept as true false charges hurled at us. Though Jesus went along with the unjust trial and sentence upon His life, He never accepted that He was actually guilty. At one point, the

High Priest questions Jesus about the disciples and his teaching. Jesus points out that He spoke openly about all these things so they go ask people who heard his teaching. Then, in John 18:22, “one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand saying “Is that how you answer the High Priest?” Jesus does not say “Oh right, I shouldn’t have done that.” He answers “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” The apostle Paul did not accept or admit to false charges placed upon him. So a good first step to deal with guilt is **Ask the Lord to help you examine your guilt feelings to see if you’re actually guilty.** Psalm 139:23-24 – “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” If you’re not actually guilty, that may help address those feelings.

But there is the emotion of guilt that comes when we have done wrong. We have hurt someone. We have caused trouble. We have disobeyed or lied or cheat. Maybe no one knows about it except God. But we still feel guilt.

And so does the rest of our society apparently even if they don’t believe in God. An author named Wilfred McClay wrote an article in Spring of 2017 entitled “The strange persistence of guilt.” He wonders how guilt can persist in a culture that is post-Christian and has deleted God from any public discussion. If there’s no God and everyone is free to define what they think is right and wrong, why do people still have guilt feelings? He observes that not only does guilt persist, it becomes a driving force in many people’s lives. He argues that the reason for this is society no longer has a means for absolution. There is no longer a place or person to go to for forgiveness.

Then he makes a really interesting proposition. He wonders if the absence of a means for forgiveness is part of the driving force behind the victim culture. Now there certainly are individuals who are victims. Someone else took advantage of or abused them. But we also see whole sub groups adopt a victim status. Think about what happens when a person or people group is identified as victims. They can put the blame and responsibility for their lives onto someone else. So that could be one way that people deal with guilt. They claim victim status and then they can absolve themselves of guilt by putting all the blame for everything on the oppressor. He also notes that if you’re not part of one of those sub groups, you can identify with a victim sub group or take up their cause. This also provides a path of absolution. You identify with the victim sub group. Then you can blame the oppressor for all the world’s ills including one’s own guilt.

Yet personal guilt remains. Proverbs points to it. Proverbs 28:1 – “The wicked flee though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” It describes those who do not admit guilt as ones who flee even though no one chases

them. Their insecurity may be driven by a guilty conscience. The more we lie and betray, the more we fear being betrayed until we flee though no one pursues. This goes beyond just remorse for past misdeeds. We struggle mightily with a sense that there is something wrong with us and that we are not who we should be. So people run away from their guilt for many years.

But the Bible explains what's going on. Romans 1:18 – "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." Back in October we looked at this passage to answer the question "why don't people believe the Bible is true." If you want to go deeper look at the October 14, 2018 message. We suppress the truth about God and our guilt yet we still feel guilty.

Thankfully, God has provided a way to actually deal with our guilt. In the Old Testament, He enabled relationship with His people through the sacrificial system. He taught them about sacrifices that opened the door to reconciliation with Him. One was the guilt offering. If you sinned or discovered you had sinned unintentionally, you would bring your guilt offering. You would confess your sin and then it was like you placed your sin onto the animal and it was sacrificed to pay for sin and reconcile with God. Then your guilt was removed.

But we don't have to do that anymore. Why? Jesus became the ultimate guilt offering through the cross. Isaiah 53:10 states – "Yet it was the will of the Lord (God the Father), to crush him (that's' Jesus). Jesus' soul makes an offering for guilt." So now instead bringing an animal to sacrifice for our guilt offering, we simply trust what Jesus has done to deal with our guilt. When we sin, we then confess it to God as if we are coming to His temple. But we also can point to the guilt offering of Jesus as payment for our sin. So then we are forgiven. We have faced our sin and our guilt. It has been dealt with. So we can live without guilt. We might still have to live with some consequences of our sin. We may need to make some things right. We may need to go back to anyone we've hurt and confess to them. But we can move forward released from the guilt and bold as a lion. Why? Because if you have faced and confessed your sins and your guilt, if your sins are covered by God's grace, then your past will not be pursuing you but only God's goodness and mercy.

So the ultimate way to address our guilt goes like this. **Bring your guilt and transgressions to the cross.** Come to God with it. He already knows about it. But He waits for us to come and admit it. Then we can be freed from our guilt because of Jesus' offering Himself as our guilt offering.

That sacrifice is what we remember as we come to the Lord's Table. But maybe you've never actually come to God with your guilt. Maybe you believed that you've done too much for God to forgive. Or maybe God has just awakened you to the reality of your guilt. But it can be dealt with today. You can do that by coming to God in prayer. You need to acknowledge that you are a sinner and that you are guilty. You need to decide that you will no longer pursue that path of life apart from God. But instead you will put the trust of your life onto Christ. You will trust what He did on the cross to pay for your guilt. Instead of trusting yourself and your ways, you begin to live in Christ. You embrace Christ as your Lord and you trust Him as your Savior.

So let's come to the Lord in prayer now. If there is anyone here who wants to come to God and deal with their guilt, I would invite you to raise your hand. Then I invite you to come to God and acknowledge your desire to meet Him. Then you need to acknowledge your guilt. Then put your trust on Christ. You could pray something like "O God, I turn from denying and covering up my guilt; I turn to Christ as my Savior and Lord." Through that faith, God will pour His Gospel and Forgiveness into your life. You will instantaneously become His adopted child.