

## Words for an Emerging Church

Wednesday, June 2, 2021

# Seeing Anxiety for What It Is

*Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to their life? —Matthew 6:27*

After the recent relaxation of the mask mandates, I noticed a surge of news articles and radio exposes covering an alleged new wave of anxiety which was sweeping the nation. With great sympathy these reporters engaged worried folks who poured out their fears about this sudden change of masking rules and the mayhem which they feared it might produce. I found amusement in this news trend as a recent poll also showed that the relaxing of masking is favored by a two to one margin, but beyond the moment of amusement I sensed a troubling story line.

All these news items dealt with these anxious masses with such a deep sympathy, and this sympathy seemed to lend an air of nobility to these people's sufferings. This is not the first time that anxiety has been treated like a virtue or badge of honor. Growing up through the Cold War, I repeatedly heard those times labelled "the age of anxiety," and while the label may have been accurate, there was a dangerous implication that accompanied it. These long-faced pundits and "wise ones" of that day would speak of this age of anxiety with deep tones of noble self-pity. "Poor us, burdened as we are by our awareness of possible nuclear annihilation and doom!" It seems that these "wise ones" live on!

Lest I sound callous toward the anxious, let me be clear that the anxious should be treated with the same sympathy due to any sufferer. (And do not think that I am above such weakness! A word of confession is in order as I am far more given to anxiety than most imagine. Worrying is something I do well!) The subtle and dangerous error enters the scene when our sympathy turns into justification. When all we can see are "poor noble worriers," we have become blind to the enemy. The anxious must not be justified in their anxiety. Anxiety is a deadly enemy which must always be seen for what it is! It steals joy, damages spirits, and causes great physical harm. When we hear of a wave of anxiety sweeping the nation our first thoughts should address how this enemy is to be defeated!

Good question. How does one defeat anxiety? Anxiety has been defined as "a non-specific fear," meaning that we sense fear but are not fully aware of the source and cause of that fear. One starts by specifically identifying the underlying trouble. Once this fear is specifically identified that matter can be carefully studied. Understanding must be sought. What are the real dangers posed by not wearing masks? How reasonable and real are these fears? What are the statistics and studies telling us?

Understanding must then give way to wisdom and an appropriate response. Last but not least is the call to prayer. Many have clung dearly to the verses in Philippians (4:6-8) which exhort us not worry but to pray, and prayer should be more than individual prayer. Put a group of believers to work on this spiritual battle. Keep a prayer journal to present your fears to God. Many will answer, "But pastor, I've tried all this, and it doesn't work." Sadly, I must report that this is a tough battle against a mighty foe, and may very well be a lifelong fight, but don't give up!

I suppose that we do live in an age of anxiety, and so it shall be until Christ returns. Until that day, let us not give up the fight, and let us *never* justify this insidious enemy! A pastor friend of mine told me of a sermon which got him into trouble a few years back. While preaching about worry he gently chided mothers who were given to much worry over their children yet tried to excuse this anxiety by claiming, "I can't help it because I love them so much." We must always reject the temptation to justify our anxiety.

Anxiety steals joy, damages spirits, and destroys our health. It is an enemy. Let us always be sympathetic to those who suffer from anxiety, but let us always see it for the enemy which it is. What fears hold you down and cause you pain? Let us identify the enemy for what it is, and let us be strong in battle.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

*O Lord God, in whom we live and move and have our being, open our eyes that we may behold thy fatherly presence ever with us. Draw our hearts to thee with the power of thy love. Teach us to be anxious for nothing, and when we have done what thou givest us to do, help us, O God our Savior, to leave the issue to thy wisdom. Take from us all doubt and mistrust. Lift our hearts up to thee in heaven, and make us to know that all things are possible to us through thy Son our Redeemer.* —Brook Foss Westcott, 1825-1901

*Father, give to us, and to all your people, in times of anxiety, serenity; in times of hardship, courage; in times of uncertainty, patience; and, at all times, a quiet trust in your wisdom and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

—New Every Morning