

## **Anxiety, Futile Thinking, and the Desires of the Heart**

**Author** Jeremy Lelek, Ph.D.

*One aspect of anxiety is that it entails a physiological response that may feel alarming or uncomfortable such as increased heart rate, shortness of breath, and “butterflies in the stomach”. This discomfort is a significant reason people develop habits to simply avoid situations that could provoke these symptoms. Spiritually, however, anxiety may be a smoke alarm for the soul indicating that a deeper fire is burning within that needs attention. This handout will take you through a passage to consider the root issues at play in your struggle with anxiety.*

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:17-24).

### **Futile Thinking, Darkened Understanding, and the Life of God**

1. To walk as a Gentile, in part, is to lose an awareness of God and His truths within a situation, therefore leading to “futile thinking” (v. 17). It is to view life, situations, others, and self from an egocentric (self-dependent) perspective while losing a conscious connection with God. When you are anxious what “gut level” thoughts take center stage? (Ex. “If I fail this exam my life is over”, “I can’t disappoint my spouse”, “I can’t handle rejection, etc.). List them below.
  
2. To give yourself over to futile thinking darkens your understanding of yourself, others, and your situation (v. 18). How is your understanding of these areas impacted by your futile thoughts? (Ex. “My existence hinges on passing this test.” “My spouse’s rejection supersedes God’s faithfulness”, “My spouse’s acceptance is what gives me life”). List below.

3. Choosing to embrace futile thoughts and operating with a darkened understanding of yourself, your situation, and others alienates you from the life that is found in God. Habitually living in these patterns will harden your heart to the Lord and foster a deeper faith in futile thoughts and a weakened faith in God (v. 18). Read the passages below and write out what aspects of a life with God are being smothered out by your anxious, futile thoughts.

- Matthew 22:37-39
- Psalm 23
- Psalm 36:7
- Psalm 86:15
- Psalm 119:130
- Psalm 139:1-16
- Hebrews 4:14-16
- 1 Peter 5:6-7

## **Learning Christ**

4. Learning from and living out of a Christ informed reality reminds you that you are free from the slavery of the old self that was captured and influenced by deceitful desires (vs. 20-22). Write out covetous desires that are likely at the root of your anxiety (Ex., safety, control, acceptance, security, success, etc.). Seek to replace these desires with the desires to glorify God, love God, and love others.

5. List habits (or manners of life) that these desires have influenced in your anxious life. What are new habits you can exercise during your anxiety that are rooted in God's glory?

## Be Made New in the Attitude of Your Mind

6. Consider the verses in question three. How might these passages shape a renewing of your mind during anxiety? What are other verses you may pull from?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Part of examining your heart and mind is to remember your core identity in Christ (v. 24). Read the following verses and complete the phrase that follows:
  - **Ephesians 4:24:** I am \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
  - **Matthew 5:14:** According to this passage, I am \_\_\_\_\_.
  - **John 1:12:** According to this passage I am a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - **John 3:16:** According to this passage I am \_\_\_\_\_.
  - **Hebrews 10:14:** According to this passage I am \_\_\_\_\_.
  - **1 Corinthians 1:30:** According to this passage, I am \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.

Now, as part of your journey with anxiety, seek to go out and be who you are according to these passages. Develop new habits in response to your anxious feelings that align with your core self, your new self. Seek to incorporate each of these questions and begin to conceptualize your struggle with anxiety as an opportunity to grow into the person God has already made you to be. Remember the following passage all along the way:

*“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.”*

2 Peter 1:3-4