

BIBLE STUDY ON SOCIAL ANXIETY – THE FEAR OF MAN

Session 1: Describing and Defining the Struggle

Key Verses: Proverbs 29:25; II Timothy 1:7

I. Schedule and Outline

Session 1: Describing and Defining the Struggle – Dec 6

Session 2: Getting to the Heart of the Matter – Dec 13

Session 3: Keys to Overcoming Fear: Loving God and Others – Dec 20

Session 4: Keys to Overcoming Fear: Being Ruled by Biblical Thinking – Dec 27

Session 5: Keys to Overcoming Fear: Fearing and Trusting the Lord – Jan 3

II. Case Studies

Social anxiety disorder (social phobia) is the third largest psychological problem in the United States today. Very few people understand this, and even in psychological circles, it is often misdiagnosed. First, let me read some descriptions of people who suffer with this problem. This information comes from the “Social Phobia/Social Anxiety Association” Web Site.

A man finds it difficult to walk down the street because he’s self-conscious and feels that people are watching him from their windows. Worse, he may run into a person on the sidewalk and be forced to say hello to them. He’s not sure he can do that. His voice will catch, his "hello" will sound weak, and the other person will know he’s frightened. More than anything else, he doesn’t want anyone to know that he’s afraid. He keeps his eyes safely away from anyone else’s gaze and prays he can make it home without having to talk to anyone.

A woman hates to stand in line in the grocery store because she’s afraid that everyone is watching her. She knows that it’s not really true, but she can’t shake the feeling. While she is shopping, she is conscious of the fact that people might be staring at her from the big mirrors on the inside front of the ceiling. Now, she has to talk to the person who’s checking out the groceries. She tries to smile, but her voice comes out weakly. She’s sure she’s making a fool of herself. Her self-consciousness and her anxiety rise to the roof.

Another person sits in front of the telephone and agonizes because she’s afraid to pick up the receiver and make a call. She’s even afraid to call an unknown person in a business office about the electric bill because she’s afraid she’ll be "putting someone out" and they will be upset with her. It’s very hard for her to take rejection, even over the phone, even from someone she doesn’t know. She’s especially afraid to call people she knows because she feels that she’ll be calling at the wrong time -- the other person will be busy — and they won’t want to talk with her. She feels rejected even before she makes the call. Once the call is made and over, she sits, analyzes, and ruminates about what was said, what tone it was said in, and how she was perceived by the other person....her anxiety and racing thoughts concerning the call prove to her that she "goofed" this conversation up, too, just like she always does. Sometimes she gets embarrassed just thinking about the call.

A man hates to go to work because a meeting is scheduled the next day. He knows that these meetings always involve co-workers talking with each other about their current projects. Just the thought of speaking in front of co-workers raises his anxiety. Sometimes he can’t sleep the night before because of the anticipatory anxiety that builds up. Finally, the meeting is over. A big wave of relief spills over him as he begins to relax. But the memory of the meeting is still uppermost in his mind. He is convinced he made a

fool of himself and that everyone in the room saw how afraid he was when he spoke and how stupid he acted in their presence. At next week's meeting, the boss is going to be there. Even though this meeting is seven days away, his stomach turns raw with anxiety and the fear floods over him again. He knows that in front of the boss he'll stammer, hesitate, his face will turn red, he won't remember what to say, and everyone will witness his embarrassment and humiliation. He has seven miserable days of anxiety ahead of him, to think about it, ruminate over it, worry about it, overexaggerate it in his mind...over and over again...

A student won't attend her university classes on the first day because she knows that in some classes the professor will instruct them to go around the room and introduce themselves. Just thinking about sitting there, waiting to introduce herself to a roomful of strangers who will be staring at her makes her feel nauseous. She knows she won't be able to think clearly because her anxiety will be so high, and she is sure she will leave out important details. Her voice might even quaver and she would sound scared and tentative. The anxiety is just too much to bear -- so she skips the first day of class to avoid the possibility of having to introduce herself in public.

Another young man wants to go to parties and other social events -- indeed, he is very, very lonely -- but he never goes anywhere because he's very nervous about meeting new people. Too many people will be there and crowds only make things worse for him. The thought of meeting new people scares him -- will he know what to say? Will they stare at him and make him feel even more insignificant? Will they reject him outright? Even if they seem nice, they're sure to notice his frozen look and his inability to fully smile. They'll sense his discomfort and tenseness and they won't like him -- there's just no way to win -- "I'm always going to be an outcast," he says. And he spends the night alone, at home, watching television again. He feels comfortable at home. In fact, home is the only place he does feel comfortable. He hasn't gone anywhere in twelve years.

III. General Characteristics

In public places, such as work, meetings, or shopping, people with social anxiety feel that everyone is watching and staring at them (even though rationally they know this isn't true). The socially anxious person can't relax, "take it easy", and enjoy themselves in public. In fact, they can never relax when other people are around. It always feels like others are evaluating them, being critical of them, or "judging" them in some way. The person with social anxiety knows that people don't do this openly, of course, but they still feel the self-consciousness and the judgment while they are in the other person's presence. It's sometimes impossible to let go, relax, and focus on anything else except the anxiety. Because the anxiety is so very painful, it's much easier just to stay away from social situations and avoid other people.

Many times people with social anxiety simply must be alone -- closeted -- with the door closed behind them. Even when they're around familiar people, a person with social phobia may feel overwhelmed and have the feeling that others are noticing their every movement and critiquing their every thought. They feel like they are being observed critically and that other people are making negative judgments about them.

One of the worst circumstances, though, is meeting people who are "authority figures", especially people such as bosses and supervisors at work, but including almost anyone who is seen as being "better" in some way. People with social anxiety may get a lump in their throat and their facial muscles may freeze up when they meet this person. The anxiety level is very high and they're so focused on "not failing" and "giving themselves

away" that they don't even remember what was said. But later on, they're sure they must have said the wrong thing...because they always do.

These are some terms that describe this struggle:

- Self-conscious
- Fear of other's judgment and evaluation
- Feelings and thoughts of inferiority
- Emotional stress when in the presence of other people
- Fear of humiliation or embarrassment
- Small mistakes seem exaggerated
- Feeling that everything you say is messed up
- Difficulty getting thoughts together and saying what you mean

Here are some situations that may be difficult for such a person:

- Fear of using a public bathroom
- Fear of eating in public or in front of other people
- Fear of writing in front of others, such as signing a check
- Fear of making a mistake in front of others

Here are some situations that typically trigger the anxiety:

- Being introduced to new people
- Criticism from anyone
- Being watched by others
- Meeting authorities
- Having to speak in front of others, especially groups of people
- Meeting others eyes

IV. World's Answer to the Problem

The world's answer to this problem is basically 2-fold. There is medication available, that only masks the problem and addresses physical responses and the symptoms of anxiety. The other answer offered is behavioral modification, which at best can only change outward responses to stressful situations through psychological techniques. These techniques are often based in a self-esteem based model, and building self-confidence. Though some outward relief from symptoms may be attained by these approaches, both fail to deal with root issues Biblically and do not provide godly motivation for change. Only God and His Word are sufficient to address and change the human heart.

V. First Step in receiving God's Answer – Define the Problem Biblically

If we want God's answer and help for this problem, we need to first embrace a Biblical understanding and definition of the problem. You will not find the term "social anxiety" or "social phobia" in the Bible. However, you will find many passages that address the issue of fear, specifically the fear of man. If you accept the term "social anxiety" for what we have been describing, then it is a relatively small step to see that this is the same as the fear of man. "Social" means involving people and "anxiety" is a type of fear – hence the fear of situations involving people becomes our Biblical definition. So what does the Bible teach about fearing others? What do the Scriptures teach about fear in general? What does the Bible teach us as Christians about our relationships and social interactions with other people? Is God concerned with our ability to be around other people, and is He concerned with how we feel around others and how we respond to

them? He most certainly is. And if you struggle in this area, He has provided answers and deliverance from this bondage. Let's look at a passage that addresses this problem.

Proverbs 29:25 (NIV)

²⁵ *Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.*

Let's consider a couple of words in the first part of this verse. First, the word "fear", which is the Hebrew word *charadah*. It means fear, anxiety, quaking, trembling, extreme anxiety and anxious care. The root word means to tremble.

Now the word "snare". It is the Hebrew word *mowqesh*, and it means a bait, a lure, or a snare – a trap.

Think about those definitions, and how they describe this problem. If you suffer with this problem, it is important for you to recognize the nature and extent of the problem Biblically. This fear or anxiety that causes you to tremble or quake inside, is a trap. It is something that controls, and limits you. Fear of others, or of being around others, is a bondage, a limitation, in a sense, a jailhouse that has you trapped and keeps you from being free. It prevents you from fully experiencing the Lord's best for your life. But be encouraged. The rest of this verse is a promise. The Word of God says that if you can learn to trust in the Lord, you will be kept safe from this snare. Recognize that the Scriptures not only describe the problem, but also offer a superior solution and release from this trap of fear.

At this point you may be tempted to become a bit defensive. You may think, "you don't understand. This is just the way I am." In other words – "God made me this way, why can't people just accept me the way I am – I just don't feel comfortable around other people, and prefer to be by myself. What is so wrong with that? Why do I have to be around other people?" Let's analyze that thinking Biblically. Is it God's intention for His children to be afraid of others? Is He the source of fear and timidity in our lives? There is a passage that addresses this question directly. It is II Timothy 1:6-8. II Timothy is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to his junior associate, Timothy. Timothy was struggling with a type of the very issue we are addressing – He was intimidated and tempted to be afraid of some people in the church he was called to lead – and here is Paul's counsel to him:

2 Timothy 1:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ *For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. ⁸ So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,*

The word for timidity, or fear means is *deilia*, "fearfulness" (from *deos*, "fright"), is rightly rendered "fearfulness" in 2 Tim. 1:7. The word denotes "cowardice and timidity" and is never used in a good sense. That spirit does not come from God.

God has not made us timid and afraid of others. This is not the way He intends for you to be. And this is great news. If He has not intended this for you, then He surely has provided a way to overcome this problem.

This letter from the Apostle Paul to Timothy was a letter of encouragement and exhortation to this young leader in the church. He was evidently being tempted to be afraid and timid of people. Paul was encouraging him that he had a gift and something given to him by God to offer the church, and that he needed to stir it up, and not allow fear and timidity to quench the work of God in his life and the ministry God had given him for others.

I want to encourage you today. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, then God has gifted you uniquely to bless other people. And fear of others can bind and ensnare you, thereby hindering the ministry God has given you to help other people. This is going to be one of the keys to overcoming this anxiety and fear – loving other people. Fear and anxiety by its very nature is self-focused and self-centered, and perfect love casts out fear. We will be looking at that principle in more detail at a later date.

VI. Six Basic Principles to Solving Problems Biblically

To finish out today's session, I want to examine 6 basic principles that are foundational to a Biblical approach to solving problems, including this problem of fear.

PRINCIPLE #1 – God's sufficient Word has the answer for all my problems.

II Peter 1:3-4

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

PRINCIPLE #2 – God has provided a way for me to effectively address every problem in my life.

I Corinthians 10:13

¹³ No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

PRINCIPLE #3 – To deal with problems God's way, I must first know Christ as my Savior.

I Corinthians 2:11-14

¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. ^{b 14} The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

PRINCIPLE #4 – Knowing Christ as my Savior does not automatically solve all my problems. I must learn to appropriate what He has provided.

b Or *Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to spiritual men*

Ephesians 4:17-24

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

²⁰ You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. ²¹ Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

PRINCIPLE #5 – Problems are not bad, but opportunities to grow to be more like Christ.

James 1:2-4

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

PRINCIPLE #6 – The foremost goal in addressing my problems is to glorify God.

Romans 11:36

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

SUGGESTED HOMEWORK FOR NEXT WEEK

1. Describe in detail situations where you have struggles in this area. List the following information: Who you were with; the circumstances; what you were thinking; what you said to others; how you were feeling; what you were wanting or desiring; what you were thinking about yourself in the situation; what you were thinking about other people in the situation; why you were in the situation;
2. List activities that you would participate in if you did not have this problem. List activities that you would look forward to (not dread or have a negative response to) if you did not have this problem. List responsibilities that you procrastinate or avoid because of this problem.
3. Try to recall and record the details of the worst situation(s) in the past related to this problem.
4. Describe how has your relationship to Christ affected this problem?
5. Read Luke 6:43-45 and describe the relationship of the heart to actions.
6. Read Hebrews 4:12-13 and reflect on the power of the Word of God to affect our hearts.
7. Work on memorizing the key verses for this week: *Proverbs 29:25; II Timothy 1:7*