

Fear, Anger, and Despair: Counseling the Heart Toward God's Glory

Week 4

Purpose of the Lesson - This lesson equips students to counsel theocentrically by showing how emotions function as diagnostic windows into worship. Students will learn to interpret fear, anger, and despair biblically to expose heart motives and redirect counselees toward repentance, faith, and living for the glory of God.

- Biblical counseling operates from a Christian worldview that consciously interprets all of life through Scripture and submits entirely to God's glory as its organizing principle. This theocentric orientation distinguishes biblical counseling fundamentally from secular approaches, which typically prioritize personal adjustment and emotional satisfaction.
- MacArthur – "Any model of counseling that is authentically biblical will be framed, designed, and executed in happy submission to the biblical demand that our lives be lived out entirely for the glory of God! In short, biblical counseling is animated by a godward focus."¹
- MacArthur provides three foundational reasons that support this God-centered focus: God demands it, and self-exaltation is destructive. True fulfillment is not through exalting self, but the biblical paradox of denying self to live for Christ.²

I. _____ are a Window into our Worship

- A. Emotions function as windows into what the heart truly values and serves; they expose our deepest cravings and commitments. Rather than treating anger, fear, and anxiety as mere psychological states to manage, biblical counseling frameworks recognize them as diagnostic indicators revealing the beliefs and desires that actually govern us.³
- **Paul Tripp – "My emotions are one of the ways my heart expresses what I crave, treasure, and serve.** If I live for your affection and you reject me, emotions of sadness and anger will infuse my life. If I treasure personal achievement and succeed, I will be happy, though I may not have joy and my happiness may be fleeting. **If we want to know what people really want, we have to learn about their emotional life.** Happiness is the result of getting what my heart craves. Discouragement is the emotional response of my heart when the thing I live for moves farther away from me. My heart is filled with fear when I suddenly lose what I am convinced I need. In short, our emotions reflect what we worship. They reveal what has captured our hearts. God gave us emotions as he made us in his image; they are intended to help us live in

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *MacArthur Pastor's Library on Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 51.

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *MacArthur Pastor's Library on Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 51.

³ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Resources for Changing Lives (P&R Publishing Company, 2002), 196.

communion with him. **They are a key indicator of whether we are living in joyful covenantal communion with him or in the service of something else.**⁴

- B. This reframes emotional struggles as spiritual diagnostics—invitations to examine whether our ruling desires align with God’s purposes or whether false beliefs about what we need are driving our distress.

II. Three Key Emotions that Indicate our Worship – _____

A. Fear – Reveals _____.

1. Biblical perspective: Fear is not primarily about circumstances; it is about **where** trust is placed. When God is not trusted as sovereign, good, and sufficient, fear rushes in to fill the vacuum (Isa. 41:10; Prov. 29:25).
2. **Core question:**
 - a. *What do I believe will keep me safe?*
 - b. *What is my security in?*
3. **What Fear Reveals:**
 - a. What the person believes they **cannot live without**.
 - b. What they believe **must be protected**.
 - c. What they **trust more** than God to provide safety or peace
 - d. It shows where trust has shifted from God to _____ or _____.
 - e. Scripture repeatedly treats fear as a theological problem.
 - i. **Psalm 112:1, 7 — 1;** *Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, Who delights greatly in His commandments. 7; He will not be afraid of evil tidings; His heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.*
 - ii. **Isaiah 41:10 —** *Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'*
 - iii. **Proverbs 29:25 —** *The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe.*
 - f. **Fear answers the question:** *Who or what am I trusting to protect me?*
 - g. That makes fear one of the clearest indicators of _____ worship.
4. **Fear often indicates an idol of: security, perfection, or a desire to look good before others.**⁵
5. **You can identify fear-driven worship by asking the following diagnostic questions:**
 - a. *What outcome are you most afraid of?*
 - b. *What do you worry about most?*
 - c. *What are you trying to control that belongs to God?*
6. If peace is only possible when a certain circumstance is secured, that circumstance has become functionally god-like in their heart.
7. **Fear says:** “If God does not give me *this*, I cannot be okay.”

⁴ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Resources for Changing Lives (P&R Publishing Company, 2002), 196.

⁵ Garrett Higbee, “‘Tony’ and Bipolar Disorder,” in *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 185.

8. Key Passages to help people with Fear/Anxiety:

- a. Matthew 6:24-34
- b. Philippians 4:6-13
- c. Psalm 46

B. Anger – Reveals Desire and _____.

1. **Biblical Perspective:** Anger erupts when something we love, want, or believe we deserve is blocked, threatened, or taken away. It exposes violated expectations and ruling desires.
 - a. **James 4:1–3 — 1;** Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? **2;** You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. **3;** You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.
 - b. James 1:19-20; Prov. 14:29; Prov. 29:22; Eph. 4:26-27,31; Matt. 15:18-19; Gen. 4:5-7)
2. **Core questions:**
 - a. *What do I believe I deserve?*
 - b. *What must I have for life to be okay?*
3. **What Anger Reveals:**
 - a. Anger reveals violated expectations
 - b. It reveals what the person believes they are owed.
 - c. What they believe should not be denied them.
 - d. Where their sense of identity or worth is located.
 - e. It exposes ruling desires and self-defined “rights”.
 - f. James 4:1–3 explicitly roots anger in sinful desires
 - g. Anger is one of the most diagnostic heart indicators because it is active and defensive, as people protect what they worship.
4. **Anger often reveals the idol of:** power, control, getting one’s own way, covetousness, or freedom.⁶
5. **Anger exposes worship by examining:**
 - a. *What did they want that they did not get?*
 - b. *What expectation was violated?*
 - c. *What are they trying to _____ or _____ through their anger?*
 - d. Anger is rarely about the stated issue; it is about **defending ones _____ glory.**
6. **Anger says:** “I deserve *this*, and you are wrong for standing in my way.”
7. **Key Passages to help people with anger:**
 - a. James 4:1-3
 - b. Ephesians 4:26-32
 - c. James 1:19
 - d. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
 - e. Psalm 103:19

C. Despair – Reveals _____

⁶ Garrett Higbee, “‘Tony’ and Bipolar Disorder,” in *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 184–185.

1. **Definition:** Despair is the sense of utter hopelessness characterizing those who have been so crushed by tragic events or guilt that they do not see meaning to their lives.⁷
2. **Biblical Perspective:** Despair is not merely sadness; it is the loss of hope when something viewed as essential for meaning or joy is gone or unreachable. Scripture presents despair as _____ hope rather than inevitable emotional collapse (Ps. 42; Jer. 17:5–7).
3. **Core question:** *What was I living for?*
4. **What Despair Reveals:**
 - a. Despair surfaces when a person’s hope collapses
 - b. It reveals what the person believed would give life meaning.
 - c. Scripture consistently ties hope to God’s promises, not circumstances (Ps. 42; Jer. 17:5–7)
 - d. What they thought would sustain them.
 - e. What they expected to save or fulfill them.
 - f. When hope dies, it exposes what the heart was clinging to.
5. **Despair often reveals the idol of:** Relationships, health, success, easing pain, feeling good, and creating comforts.⁸
6. **You can identify despair-driven worship by asking:**
 - a. *What has been lost that makes life feel pointless now?*
 - b. *What did they believe would satisfy them if attained?*
 - c. *What does their despair say about where their hope was anchored?*
 - d. When hope collapses entirely, it shows that hope was anchored to something _____, not eternal.
7. **Despair says:** “Without *this*, life is no longer worth living.”
8. **Key Passages to help people with despair:**
 - a. Psalm 42
 - b. Lamentations 3:21-26
 - c. 2 Corinthians 1:8-10

Emotion	Heart Orientation	Worship Question
Fear	Trust	What am I trusting to save me?
Anger	Desire	What am I demanding?
Despair	Hope	What am I living for?

III. Practical Example of Implementing Biblical Counseling for the Glory of God

- Expose what the person is worshipping through diagnostic questions.
- Interpret their responses in light of Scripture.
- Redirect their worship from idols to God.

⁷ Douglas J. Miller, “Despair,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 243.

⁸ Garrett Higbee, “‘Tony’ and Bipolar Disorder,” in *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating Sufficiency of God’s Resources in Scripture*, ed. Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 185.

A. Case Study: Mark

1. Mark is a 42-year-old man who has been a member of the church for eight years. He is married and has two teenage children. He has previously served faithfully in a teaching ministry and was known for being dependable and committed. Recently, Mark requested counseling because he says he feels overwhelmed, angry, and spiritually dry. He reports difficulty sleeping and says he is “constantly running worst-case scenarios” in his mind. He feels as though life is spiraling and that he is losing control.
2. Mark says his anxiety has increased due to stress at work. His company is going through restructuring, and he fears he may lose his job. He also worries about finances and is fearful that his children are “headed in the wrong direction.” Mark says, “If I don’t stay on top of things, everything could collapse.”
3. Mark also reports growing marital tension. He believes his wife is emotionally distant and unsupportive. He says she criticizes him and does not respect him. He admits that he often becomes sarcastic, withdraws emotionally, and sometimes explodes when she confronts him. Mark says, “I’m tired of carrying everything alone.”
4. In addition, Mark is bitter toward church leadership. Recently, he was asked to step back from his teaching role because of relational concerns. Mark believes this was unfair. He says, “I served faithfully for years, and now they treat me like I’m the problem. No one appreciates what I’ve done.” Since then, Mark has pulled away from fellowship, stopped attending midweek gatherings, and avoids conversations with leaders. He often replays the situation in his mind. Mark says, “I just want peace again. I want my life back.”

B. Part 1: What Does Mark Think His Problems Are

(Write Mark’s presenting issues in your own words)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

C. Part 2: Observable Problems and Patterns**1. Wrong Behaviors**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

2. Wrong Thoughts

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. Wrong Words

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

4. Wrong Spiritual Patterns

- _____

D. Part 3: Exposing Heart Indicators (Fear, Anger, Despair)

1. Evidence of Fear / Anxiety (Trust Issue):

- a. What do Mark's fears reveal about what he trusts most? _____

- b. He trusts **his own control**, planning, and ability to manage life more than God's providence.
- c. **Heart issue revealed:** trust in control/self-management more than God

2. Evidence of Anger / Bitterness (Desire/Entitlement Issue):

- a. What does Mark's anger reveal about what he wants or feels entitled to? _____

- b. He feels entitled to **respect, affirmation, influence, and appreciation**.
- c. **Heart issue revealed:** demand for respect/recognition and personal glory

3. Evidence of Despair / Hopelessness (Hope Issue):

- a. What does Mark's discouragement reveal about what he was living for? _____

- b. He was living for **identity through ministry role and recognition**, not for Christ's glory.
- c. **Heart issue revealed:** hope/identity tied to usefulness and approval.

**4. What idols of the heart (Ezekiel 14:3) appear most likely? _____
 _____**

5. Vertical vs. Horizontal Living

- a. In what ways is Mark living horizontally rather than vertically?
- b. Where do you see Mark seeking his own glory rather than God's glory?

**E. What truths about God does Mark appear to be forgetting or resisting and what Scriptures would you point Mark to? _____
 _____**

F. What false beliefs need to be corrected with Scripture?

1. "Peace comes from control."
2. "I deserve respect and recognition."
3. "Life is only meaningful if I'm valued."
4. "God is not managing this well."
5. "My circumstances determine my joy."

G. Where does Mark need to repent at the heart level?

1. He must repent of worshiping: control, reputation, ministry identity, and approval instead of worshiping God.

H. What would faith and obedience look like this week?

1. Confessing sin to God and wife
2. Asking forgiveness
3. Praying instead of ruminating
4. Re-engaging church fellowship
5. Meeting with leaders humbly
6. Obeying Scripture regardless of outcomes
7. Choosing thankful trust over anxiety

I. Part 7: Poor Counselor Response vs. Biblical Counselor Response**1. Poor Counselor Response (Man-Centered / Horizontal)**

- a. Mark, it sounds like you're under a lot of pressure. Anyone would be anxious in your situation. Your main issue is stress, and you need to reduce it. I recommend taking time for yourself, doing activities that make you feel good, and setting boundaries with your wife and church leaders. If people aren't supporting you, you should distance yourself from them. Your emotions are valid, and the main goal is for you to feel better and regain balance.
- b. **Problems with This Response:**
 - i. Ignores sin and worship
 - ii. Treats emotions as the main issue
 - iii. Offers comfort without repentance
 - iv. Reinforces self-focus
 - v. No Scripture, no call to faith

2. Biblical Counselor Response (God-Centered / Vertical)

- a. Mark, I'm sorry you're suffering, but we need to look deeper than circumstances. Scripture teaches that fear, anger, and despair reveal what the heart is trusting, demanding, and hoping in. Your anxiety reveals you are trying to find peace through control. Your anger reveals desires that may have become demands. Your despair reveals misplaced hope in being valued and recognized.
- b. God is using this trial to expose what you are living for. The issue is not merely stress—it is worship. Romans 1 shows that when we do not glorify God, we exchange His glory for something else. Christ calls you to deny yourself, trust God, and live for His glory. This will require repentance, renewed faith, and obedience. But God gives grace, and His Word provides everything you need for life and godliness.
- c. **Strengths of This Response:**
 - i. Exposes heart motives
 - ii. Uses Scripture as authority
 - iii. Offers hope through repentance and Christ
 - iv. Calls to obedience
 - v. God-centered aim (glory)

J. What Scriptures Would You Use to Counsel Mark? (List at least 3 passages)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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