



Stress and Holidays

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The holidays are here. We had Halloween last week. It's only a short two weeks until Thanksgiving; can you believe it? And then shortly after that will be Christmas, so I have a question for you. How many of you – even though it's not Thanksgiving yet – have Christmas decorations up? There are some of you. How many of you will wait until after Thanksgiving to put your Christmas decorations up? Thank you. These are my people. It feels like we have to have some cut off, right? Because if we don't set a cutoff, a boundary, then it's just going to get earlier. The poor Branson entertainers have been singing Deck the Halls since Labor Day or so. It just keeps getting earlier and earlier.

How about taking your decorations down? How many of you will have your decorations down before New Year's? Okay. How many of you feel like as long as the Christmas lights come down some time before Tax Day, that's acceptable? Then there are those that have gone to take their outside Christmas lights down and you're like, *You know what? In just a couple of months they're going back up anyway...* There just going to stay up this year, right?

My grandfather, Fred Bowlen, was the most unique Christmas decorator that I know. He would have his Christmas decorations down before Christmas. He would put it back in the attic before Christmas. So, we would go visit a week or so before Christmas and we would have our family meal, our gathering and exchange gifts and have a great time. By the end of the night, he would say, "Y'all help me get the Christmas tree up to the attic."

We'd say, "Papa, it's like December 20th." He'd say, "I don't care. You guys have been here and we've had Christmas. Plus, it's easier with you here to help me I can get it back up to the attic." So, we would say, "Okay, Papa, we'll get that tree put away." So, very unique in that.

Whether it's decorations, Christmas lights, or whatever it is, we tend to face a lot of stress around the holidays. Some more than others. For some of us, we end up like our friend, Clark Griswold, just completely worn out, whether it's Christmas lights or whatever else. We may not be this stressed out, but each of us tend to experience stress and some anxiety around the holidays in some form or another.

The Brawner family is no exception. I have, on several occasions, deemed the Brawner family the Griswolds. My wife wanted me to point out that we are the edited for television version of the Griswolds. There's certain language and content in the movie that doesn't quite match up, but we're the Griswolds and here's exhibit A for you. If you are familiar with the movie, here I am emptying our chemical toilet, into the proper receptacle, unlike Cousin Eddy in the movie.

For exhibit B, we're going to go back to 1985, to the Brawner family Christmas tree. We had just moved to Branson, Missouri, a small town where Christmas tree lots are nowhere to be found. We're trying to decorate for our first Christmas here in Branson. Mom sends Dad and the kids packing out to find out Brawner family Christmas tree. We spend all day. Dad was getting stressed and worn out. We can't find a tree. Eventually, we got a tree. We secured it by means that you may or may not deem "legal," but we got our Christmas tree.

We got it home and we got it setup and decorated and we were all admiring, like the Griswolds, our Brawner family Christmas tree. It was this quiet moment when my sister, Jill, four years old at the time, said, "Mom, why do you have to run after you cut down a Christmas tree?"

My mom looks at my dad and says, "Jill, that's a great question. Jim, why do you have to run after you cut down a Christmas tree?"

I'm not sure of the conversation that took place; they had it behind closed doors. I'm not sure what was said or what was decided, but I do know that that year was born the Brawner family tradition of the cut and run. We kept it up for few years and then, eventually, we got an artificial Christmas tree. I think we decided we didn't want to have to visit Dad in the Taney County Jail, so we went with the artificial one.

We have stress and we have anxiety whether to the level of Clark Griswold or not. I believe the problem is that we've just come to accept it. December and November, the holidays are going to be stressful and that's just part of life around the holidays. The problem is that as we just let stress creep in and we just accept it, it wears us down, it burns us out, it exhausts us. It affects us emotionally and mentally and even physically. It affects every area of our life as a result: our relationships, our work, our parenting, our marriage, even our health. The problem with this stress creeping in is that it wears us down and affects all areas of our life.

I want to help you try to understand, if you don't know, what's going on in the stress response. We are going to study a little basic human physiology this morning, a little **Stress Physiology 101**.

The nervous system can be broken down into two main components: the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system. The central nervous system is the brain and the spinal cord and they're kind of the central command. They process all the input and the outgo.

Then the nervous system can be further broken down into the somatic nervous system and the autonomic nervous system. The somatic is that which is under control. If I go to pick up a water bottle, if I swing a golf club, whatever it is that's under your direct control. On the contrary, the autonomic nervous system is that which is automatic. Remember autonomic is automatic, it just happens. It's not under our direct control, such as our digestion, our kidneys filtering our blood, our respiration, our heartbeat, and all of those things.

Then the autonomic, that which is automatic, can be further divided into the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. These are more commonly known as fight or flight versus the rest and restore. These two systems are in balance with one another. It's important to

understand that they can't both be elevated, and they can't both be suppressed; they are in balance with one another. In order for one to be elevated, the other is going to be suppressed and vice versa.

So, what's going on in this sympathetic response, this fight or flight, is our body is releasing chemicals like epinephrine and norepinephrine, commonly known as adrenalin and things like cortisol and the stress hormones. What that does is it puts us in balance heavy with the fight or flight, the survival response and moves us away from the parasympathetic response, which, when it prevails, we're releasing chemicals like insulin-like growth factor and something called human growth hormone or HGH.

If you follow sports, you may remember HGH from a few years ago. It was something that professional athletes were taking as a performance enhancing drug. They found that when they took it, their athletic performance just took off. Not only that, but when they were injured, their healing was much quicker. So, you get an idea of this HGH and the importance of the parasympathetic nervous system and the rest and restore.

You may also know a couple that had trouble getting pregnant. They moved away from that one way or another. They either adopted or eventually they were able to get pregnant, but they had a lot of difficulty. What happens is they move away from the stressful situation of not being able to have a child and what happens soon after that? Baby number two is on the way, right? Because even the reproductive system thrives in a parasympathetic environment.

So, you get the importance of the balance of this stress, sympathetic, fight or flight survival response versus the parasympathetic rest and restore. The sympathetic response is good, we need that in certain situations. If we stumble upon a momma bear and her cubs, we better be able to respond, right? And we're going to need that response. If we see a child who cannot swim fall into the water and that child is drowning, we need that response to be able to save that child.

The problem is that this response occurs whether there is a real or perceived threat. All these autonomic, automatic responses just happen regardless of whether it's a real threat or a perceived threat. So, around the holidays, we can tend to stay in this fight or flight response, this high stress response even with perceived threats. So, the question then is what are the threats that we perceive around the holidays that tend to keep us stressed out?

Consumer Reports National Research Center did a survey where they outlined it for us. They gave us a list of the things that we stress about over the holidays. I'm going to read it to you:

- The first one, by a long shot, is **crowds and long lines**. People stress us out. Go figure. The next two I thought were interesting.
- The next two are dead even with one another. They are **gaining weight and getting into debt**. It's interesting to me because these are both an issue of income and outgo, right. One with calories and one with money.

- The next one is **gift shopping**. There's a lot of shopping around this time of year and that stresses some of us out for different reasons.
- Then, here we go. **Seeing certain relatives**. Because we all have a Cousin Eddy in our lives. If you don't know who it is, it might be you.
- The last thing that we stress about around the holidays is **having to be nice**. Can I just tell you, follower of Jesus, if you're stressed about having to be nice, there may be a heart issue that needs to be dealt with.

Here's another perceived threat that I think we have in the church. As Christians, some of us perceive that we are battle this time of year. We feel as though we are called to defend December 25th as if it's a sacred Christian practice for us to be at battle for. I believe that our heart can be right in this because we want people to know Jesus, we want people to find Jesus, but the problem comes in when the way that we tend to fight this battle can be argumentative and judgmental. In fact, it can even distance us from the very people that Jesus desires for us to reach.

Jesus didn't call us to this battle. He didn't tell us to defend December 25th. As a matter of fact, Jesus never even said to remember and celebrate his miracle birth. He said to remember his death, burial, and resurrection and celebrate that. But, even with that, he didn't say pick a Sunday in springtime where we gather in church and talk about that. He said to do it often and he gave us ways to do it as well. He said baptism is one way that you should celebrate his death, burial, and resurrection, that's why we are so passionate with celebration of baptisms here at Woodland Hills. He gave us communion to remember his death, burial, and resurrection and told us to celebrate that. We're going to do that together a little bit later this morning, but that's why we do it often, we do it regularly. These are things that Jesus has called us to do.

It's important for us to understand that when we have stress and anxiety, at the root of that is a fear. Fear is the core of any surface level anxiety that you have. Psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists will tell you that if there is anxiety that you suffer from, their job in therapy is to find out what that core fear is. So, there are fears at the depths of where, on the surface, there is stress and anxiety.

So, as we look at stress and anxiety at the holidays, then we ask the question of what is it that we are afraid of? What, at our core, is causing us to be fearful and create stress? One is having to be around more people. We fear running out of relational energy because you get to the point where you just can't stand another gathering, you can't stand another line, you can't stand more people and there is a reason for that. Fear of how awesome you perform at your Thanksgiving meal... Maybe you or your family is in charge of that. You're bringing relatives in and you're fearful of the disputes that will take place among the relatives or the way that people will interact with one another.

If you are a business person, maybe you're fearful of the yearend because it could be the end of your fiscal year as well, so you might be fearful of what's going on in your business here at the end of the year.

Fear of losing control of your weight and your money. Remember those are two things that we stress about, so that may be a core fear.

Fear of failing as a gift giver because there are a lot of gifts to be bought and a lot of people that we're going to be giving gifts to. We may be fearful that we don't get the right gift, that we forget someone, and things like that. We allow these fears to linger. As the fears creep in and these things that we stress about cause us to be in this survival mode, it wears us out. All we really want is the rest and restore. We really want to get over to this side of the balance, but we're pulled down by all these things that stress us out.

Let's look to scripture to see how we deal with it. Matthew 11 says... These are the words of Jesus.

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

It's great to read this scripture because we hear that word *rest* and it puts us in that restorative state. The important thing, as we read this, is to see what Jesus is saying here. He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." He says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

So, it's important for us to know what a yoke is. A yoke is something that attaches an animal to the burden that it's carrying. Really, the yoke is the means by which that animal carries its load. What Jesus is saying here is "If you want rest, I'm not going to take your burden away from you, I'm not going to take this load away from you." What he's saying is, "Take my yoke upon you. Do things my way because my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The problem is that in our human nature, we tend want to try to do things ourselves the way that we think that we can do things better and we often end up looking like this poor guy. You see, we yoke ourselves to our burden in such a way that we render ourselves useless. We think that it's going to be okay, but often we stiff-arm God and say, "I can do things my way and it's going to be just fine" despite instructions from him otherwise.

This isn't just the holidays, this is all year, but it certainly applies to the holidays. We think, *I don't need to be honest all the time. Dishonesty here and there is okay* even though Proverbs 4: 22 says, ***Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.*** We think we can harbor bitterness and anger in our hearts and we can be unforgiving even though Ephesians 4: 32 says, ***Be kind to one another, forgiving one another.*** We think we can be unfaithful in our marriage, either physically or emotionally. I believe Facebook has caused a lot of emotional infidelity even though Hebrews 13: 4 says ***Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure.*** We think that we can over burden ourselves on our calendar, we can schedule too much with no margin in our schedule even though Ephesians 5: 16 says ***Make wise use of your time.*** Then we think we can spout off with our opinions anytime we have one because we want to be heard even though Proverbs 17: 27 says, ***A wise man restrains his words.***

The list can go on and on about the ways that we think that we can do things and get away with doing it our way even though God instructs us otherwise. All that ever happens is we keep making a donkey out of ourselves. If you saw the earlier version of notes, there might have been a different word there, but then my wife reminded me we're the edited for television version, so we went with donkey.

The point here is this. **The best way to avoid stress tomorrow is to seek God's will today.** The best way to try to reduce our stress and anxiety tomorrow is to do things God's way today. We have a responsibility in this. We're at least somewhat accountable to the amount of stress and anxiety that we can invite into our lives. Second Timothy 1: 7 says, ***For God gave us a spirit not of fear, but of power and love and self-control.*** This is a very contrasting scripture. Remember fear is at the core of all stress and anxiety and God didn't give us that spirit. Rather, he gave us a spirit of power and love and self-control. Self-control to take it upon ourselves to do things his way, the way he has instructed because that is how he gives us rest. To take his yoke upon us and do things his way.

As we understand that, let's look at the holidays and talk about some practical application of God's word and his way of doing things and how we can get out ahead of the stress of the holidays and how we can, rather, happen to the holidays instead of the holidays happening to us.

Service

This is the first application. Here in a couple of weeks, you're going to have the opportunity to participate in the Christmas Giving Tree. If you don't know what that is, we have envelopes with names of families out in the Children's Auditorium. In two weeks, that opens up and you can adopt a family and you and your family can purchase groceries and gifts for a family that may not be able to have them otherwise. This is based on Philippians 2: 4 that says, ***Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others.***

Service, in this way, is interesting because when we are focused on the interest of others, somehow, we become less aware and concerned about our own interests. So, service is very important.

Relatives

So, Cousin Eddy is on his way, like it or not. The thing about certain relatives that we get... You get to choose your friends, but you're stuck with your relatives. So, certain relatives that we're around will cause certain disputes. There's just this toxic argument that takes place every time you're together, which the holidays bring us together. This argument or this dispute seems even scripted; you just know what's coming. It's like the script is written out. Ellen Griswold knows what I'm talking about. Let's let her talk about it.

Clark Griswold: Honey, they're family; they're not strangers off the street.

Ellen Griswold: All they do is argue.

Clark Griswold: Christmas is about resolving differences and seeing through the petty problems of family life.

Ellen Griswold: Yeah. And it's about my mother accusing your mother of buying cheap hot dogs. And your mother accusing my mother of waxing her upper lip. Then they don't speak to each other...

Clark Griswold: Your mother waxes her upper lip?

Ellen Griswold: She has for years.

Clark Griswold: Hmm... Doesn't show.

So, you see the Griswolds have it too: family members that come together and they have their scripted arguments about the same thing. You may have that with someone you know or one of your family members. It may not be about hot dog choices or personal grooming measures, but it's usually around politics or religion or something and the problem is that scripted argument takes place and nothing ever gets accomplished. You argue with one another and all you do is create this toxic environment that blows the celebration for everybody else.

Here's the great thing. Since it is scripted, it's also preventable. You can see it coming. You know that it's going to happen heading into the celebration with that family member. You, exercising power, love, and self-control, can decide you're not going to do that this year. So, as soon as someone pushes play on that script, you make the decision and say, "You and I have been through this before. We don't accomplish anything; we just get mad at one another, so let's talk about something else. Let's choose to talk about football or something like that." Talk about the great mystery of 1985 when the cedar trees came up missing along the roads of Taney County or something where there are not going to be opinions that are needed to be expressed. Choose a different script.

Solitude

Solitude is important, and it is a Christian practice that we believe everyone needs on a regular basis, but particularly around the holidays. Why? It's because we tend to be around more people. Jesus even modeled this for us. We read in Luke 5: 16 that Jesus got alone, but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. So, notice that he often withdrew to lonely places (he got alone) and prayed. So, as we tend to be around a lot of people that will stress us out and wear us out, it's important to withdraw to a lonely place and pray. We withdraw from the unreliable source of our relational energy lives – the people around us – and we plug into our one true source of our relational energy. Solitude is important.

Exercise

I may have lost a few of you here, but hang with me. Exercise is important because what we know is that when you exercise, it has been shown to significantly reduce stress and anxiety. Actually, it has been shown to be as effective as antidepressant medications. When you exercise, your body releases something called endorphins. You may have heard of endorphins, but did you ever notice that

endorphins sounds strangely like Morphine. The two act on the same receptor. They both block the receptors called the mu-receptors, which are the pain receptors in our central nervous system that send the pains signals. So, look how important exercise can be in reducing stress and anxiety. Ted, in case you're watching online, exercise is this thing were some people will exert themselves... Sorry, couldn't resist. You guys know Ted gets his exercise, right? He's got the strongest right arm in this church with his fly fishing. I'm sure he could use some HGH for his fishing excursions. So, exercise is important.

Some of you are thinking how you're going to start January 1. Forget it. Ninety percent of New Year's resolutions fail by Valentine's Day anyway, so go get the benefit of endorphins during the holidays when you're stressed and worn out.

Busybody

We need to avoid the busybody mentality. Let's look at an account in scripture for this as well. Luke 10 says: ***38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"***

41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things... Almost like it was December, huh? 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

What Jesus is saying to Martha here is "I'm right here. You're dealing with all this stuff and I'm right here. Mary and I are sharing this relationship with one another and you're too concerned about things. So, no, I'm not going to take this relationship from her."

Gary Smalley used to say, "Life is relationships. The rest is just details." So, the holidays should be about relationships because the rest is just details. I believe that Papa had it right. He was far more concerned with the relationships of the family members that were coming to visit him than he was with whether his Christmas tree was up and looking pretty on Christmas Day.

First, we need to acknowledge that the holidays can be filled with stress and anxiety and it's a stressful time. Then, we need to set out seeking God's will and his way of doing things so as to reduce that stress and anxiety. We tend to be like Martha, anxious about many things, but may we be more like Mary and focus on the good portion, Jesus Christ, who will not be taken from us.

May we be more like Papa and elevate the importance of the relationships of the people around us more than the traditions and the decorations and the gifts. And may we celebrate Christmas, the miracle birth of Jesus, remembering that the most important thing about it is that it paves the way for his miracle death, burial, and resurrection, which gives us a way to come into right relationship with God the Father.

Communion

Now, we're going to celebrate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus by taking communion together. We'll remind you, as a church, that this is the part of our service that is reserved for those who have placed faith in Jesus, as scripture commands us. If you haven't, we would ask that you just not participate in this part of our service. In scripture, we are commanded when we take communion, when we celebrate the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection in this way, it is important for us to prepare our hearts. So, we are going to give you a moment to pray by yourself in your chair as the music plays and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you any unresolved issue, any unresolved fear, any unresolved anxiety that you need to deal with that he can move through you and heal. So, prepare your hearts as we prepare to take communion together.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. – 1 Corinthians 11

In just a moment, we are going to sing one more worship song. A couple of things to remind you of: the first Sunday of the month, we take our mercy offering back in the foyer as you leave. That offering is to meet the physical needs of church families here at Woodland Hills, so we would ask you to participate in that. Also, again, we are going to have our prayer team that will be up front, and they would love to pray with you about anything you need prayer about. Scripture says that the prayer of a faithful person has power as it is working. We've got some very faithful people that would love to prayer with you, so we encourage you to come forward during our last worship song.

Let me just encourage you one more time, as we approach the holidays, that you would go in with a plan to seek God's will and his way of doing that, and that we would do it with a heart that is more concerned about the relationships with the people around us rather than the traditions and the decorations and everything else. And that we would do it not with a spirit of fear that brings stress and anxiety, but rather with a spirit of power and love and self-control.