



A Quiet Christmas Part 5 – Mental Health Panel

Ted: Welcome to Woodland Hills; we're glad that you're here in between Christmas and New Year's. It's a big day and I do hope that if you're wanting to go deeper in your faith and in relationships in this church, you will stop by and see Cathy in the lobby. If you go out these doors here when you leave, she will be over there to your right. I would encourage you to stop by and say hello and find out how you can get connected.

As part of our worship, we take an offering in these baskets. This is the end of the year; many of you are giving for the last time in 2019 and your giving has been joyful and generous and we're grateful for all the families that have been helped here in our church, as well as in our community, and then with our missionaries around the world taking the gospel out.

Today is a little bit different of a day as we end *A Quiet Christmas*. We really want this to be a Sunday full of hope and help for those who are dealing with worry, anxiety, depression, and even those who have thoughts of suicide. We put this out yesterday and I can tell you it's probably the most response to a message, in the last 24 hours, before a message is given, from many who are struggling.

The goal of today is to help those who are struggling, to give hope to those who are struggling, but we also believe at our church that every member is a minister and we want you to take notes. Don't be afraid to pull out your phone and pull out the note pad and take notes. No one will accuse you of gaming. We want you to find ways that you can help family and friends who are struggling. We're going to get very practical with this.

I've invited three folks from Woodland Hills to join me in this panel. I'm just going to be asking them questions. I got so much out of the first service; it felt like I was in a counseling session. It was super helpful. Ya'll know Dr. Travis Brawner; he's on our teaching team here at the church. He's an elder at our church as well. He's up here for the medical side of this.

And then two good friends: Pam Hazel; she's actually the counselor here at our church. Many of you may have been to meet with Pam. She's also a school counselor. She becomes a professor at C of O next semester. So, she's got a lot going on. She's super helpful for our church family.

Then before Pam, we had Ryan as a counselor for seven years at our church and then Hope Restored at Focus on the Family stole him away to do marriage intensives. So we're not really talking to them anymore and we're barely starting to like Ryan again. No, we love Ryan; he's a phenomenal counselor.

Ryan is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Pam is a licensed professional counselor and LPC. Both Pam and Ryan do marriage intensives at NIM.

We're going to jump right into it. Again, we hope that this is helpful today for you, and we hope that you leave encouraged. Some things surfaced in the first service that I hope surface again. I'm going to kick it off with Ryan to talk about the difference between worry, anxiety, depression, and the symptoms.

Ryan: Yeah, absolutely. Worry is something that we can all relate to. It's something that's usually based on some realistic issues. Some may be worried about making ends meet this month, some might be worried about a job performance. Usually it's somewhat fleeting, temporary. Anxiety tends to sit around quite a bit longer. In fact, I think of anxiety like a parasite; it'll look for something to be anxious about. It's a pervasive feeling that can even lead to impaired functioning in your job and social relationships, that sort of thing.

Pam: I would add too that that anxiety is felt more in you body and maybe less cognitive and worry is more cognitive.

Ted: Yeah, and how do I know when I'm moving from anxiety to depression and when I would need to begin to seek professional help. I should seek it at the anxiety level or at any time throughout all of this, but when do I know this is something I need to take seriously and do something about. Or, if I have a family member that's struggling, when do I know that it's time for me to step in? We'll talk in a second about helpful things to say and unhelpful things to say. What are those symptoms moving to depression?

Ryan: Depression would be different than anxiety. There are going to be some similar symptomology between the two, but obviously with depression, you are in a more depressed state. Even depression can be seasonal, it can be based on circumstances. I can be depressed if I'm an OU fan this morning.

Ted: That was brutal.

Ryan: But, instead, I'm actually joyous. I could be depressed for a lot of different reason. There could even be depression from loss of a loved one. But at the point that depression becomes... And even at that point, it could be helpful to seek professional help, even if it's more of a seasonal thing. Just somebody to process with, to talk about these issues with, maybe even help you gain some perspective. But then what we look at is more of a clinical depression, which isn't necessarily based on any precipitating event; it's just something I'm dealing with because of maybe an imbalance of chemicals, specifically serotonin. Definitely, at that point, I do not want to try to do that on my own. When I start to realize *you know I'm not just upset about something, I just feel this dark cloud over me all the time and I'm not finding enjoyment in the things I used to find enjoyment in.*

Pam: Often too, people experience maybe weight loss or gain or insomnia or sleeping too much.

Ted: Okay, and so Travis, when we go to the doctor, I'm always shocked. I'm going in for a sinus infection and I am asked literally 50 question about my health. I'm kind of a private person. How many

of you would say you are a private person and you don't even want to tell your doctor what's really going on. *Why would you ask a private person to raise their hand right now about being a private person?*

There are times in a doctor's office that I'll be asked a question and my first thought will be, *That's none of your business.* That will be my first thought, then my next thought is, *Why do you need to know that to help me with my sinus infection? You just get your pad out, get me my prescription, and I'll be on my way.* So, talk about it. This is the attitude that I think a lot of people in here would probably relate to. But how does mental wellness and physical wellness... What is that cycle?

Travis: So, you can't separate the two. I'm passionate about this, and I've taught this from the front about how we are three-part beings: the body, the soul, and the spirit. In our soul, it's our mind, our emotions, our thoughts, our will, and you cannot separate that from the rest of our being. So, where this ties into the issues of mental illness, mental health is that because you can't separate them, you can get confused between the two.

So, like Pam was talking about with the different symptoms of depression, anxiety, you can have trouble concentrating, lack of energy, insomnia, can't sleep or sleeping too much, so many different symptoms that we may be looking for an answer in the physical realm when, as a matter of fact, it's a mental illness that we're suffering from. That may be one of those cases you've experienced or heard of where all the lab tests are coming back normal; the CAT Scan, the X-rays, the MRIs aren't finding anything wrong, it may be overlooked that it could be a mental illness.

Ted: Yeah, so one of the questions we received is: "Is it permissible for a Christian to take prescription drugs for mental illness?" All of you can answer this. And if so, what cautions would you give?

Travis: I could go on all morning on this topic with so many examples in scriptures and talking points, but the main one I want to get across... There's one that just speaks right to it and that's an example in 1 Timothy 5: 23. This is Paul speaking to Timothy when he said, ***23 No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.*** This scripture is oftentimes used as a talking point in the issue of wine, but what I'm doing here is I want to raise up and look at the overarching issue that this is addressing, what Paul is instructing Timothy in here. He's saying take something, ingest something for an ailment that you have. That speaks very clearly that yes, it's okay for Christians to take medication not just for physical, but also for mental illnesses.

The caution is that's not the first place we go. We have other things that we need to do and, again, that's so as to avoid going on...

Ted: And pretty much all of you would agree with that. It shouldn't be the first step.

Ryan: Right, absolutely. I liken it to taking care of my physical body because it is my physical body and my brain is part of the physical body. I take Lisinopril just for high blood pressure, but that's only one thing I do in the overall wellbeing of my heart. Hopefully, I am exercising, I'm eating well, and I'm

getting the right nutrition. All that stuff goes into taking care of my heart, including that little, tiny, pink pill called Lisinopril. Same thing with my emotions, with my mental wellbeing. Hopefully, if I'm taking something like an antidepressant, SRI, something like that, that is one thing I'm doing, but it's in the grand scheme of a lot of things that maybe I'm doing for the overall wellbeing of my mental health

Pam: A multifaceted approach is really important like you said, Ryan. I think sometimes we get in the habit with depression of just trying to get someone to "Just get yourself together, pull yourself together," but just like you were talking about, the medication you take... If someone had diabetes, we wouldn't say, "Just ask your body to make more insulin," we would get help for that, so sometimes that's necessary.

Ted: So, you're using 1 Timothy 5: 23 and sometimes people could move from this passage... and there are many in here that would use wine as a coping mechanism and there are a lot of coping mechanisms that people use for physical and mental illness. You said something earlier, Ryan, that hit me because the church can be known... People can leave sometimes feeling judged, full of shame, which is not at all what we want. We want people to find life in Christ and the fullness of that life. One of the questions we get asked is and we all know technology is affecting and adding to our worry and anxiety and depression in a culture where we're all staring our devices all the time. When I brought that up as a coping mechanism in context with this, you said something that's rarely ever said in the church that I want you to share about technology.

Ryan: And not just technology but any coping mechanism that we've come up with just to try to get through. I want to be really careful that we're not pouring more shame onto somebody saying, "Bad you, bad you, you spend too much time on this," because some of those coping mechanisms, as dysfunctional as they may be, have allowed people to get to a certain point to make it through a certain point. I was backstage talking to Travis and Pam and I likened it to... I'm a NASA nerd so this may not connect to everybody, but I liken it to the lunar module that Apollo 13 used to get around the moon. They used it for a function that it wasn't really built to be used for, but it got them through until they were eventually able to move back into the command module and safely make it back to Earth. I'm a nerd.

Ted: I've seen the movie.

Ryan: Yes. So, I just think about... We know there are negative coping mechanism and we could all document how technology could be something that could actually cause more anxiety, but, on the same hand, for some people, that's been the thing that has gotten them through a time. I just want to be careful that we're not pouring more shame and, goodness, we could all probably find coping mechanisms in our life that are not ideal.

Ted: And so we want to remove it, but you said replace it.

Ryan: Yes, replace it. I think about the verse Proverbs 4: 23 which says, ***Above all else, guard your heart.*** For most of us, we don't really know how to do that, what that looks like to take good care of our

emotional being. So, hopefully, we want to develop our skills in that, rely on the Lord for that, but, man, a lot of us have found ways that have just helped us cope and get through.

Pam: So many times, we have this negative, self-talk going that's just telling us to just get ourselves together. Focus has a great tool called *The Self-Care Cycle* that's really about taking those feelings and processing through them with the Lord and with ourselves. And that's important instead of just baring them and trying to go on.

Ted: And is that online? Can we get that online?

Pam: I don't know. Ryan, do you...

Ted: It used to be under NIM.

Ryan: No, it's not online.

Pam: We probably have a connection.

Ted: We'll find a way to get it.

Ryan: You could come to an intensive and get it.

Ted: Travis, you were going to say something.

Travis: Ryan was talking about withdrawing. You don't want to withdraw a coping mechanism without having a healthy replacement.

By the way, I appreciate the analogy. I understood the moon in what you said and that's it.

As we are withdrawing from maybe unhealthy coping mechanisms and adding... The important thing is, as we talk about how lifestyle and overall health are all connected, we know that 80% of Americans don't get the physical activity that they need. And when we talk about medications, regular physical exercise has been shown to be as effective as antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications. We had great conversation backstage talking about how there are no mental health habits, there are no physical health habits, there are no spiritual healthy habits. They are all habits; they are all our behaviors and the way that ties in is very important.

Ted: And that's the perfect transition to what are some good mental health habits we can all do to maintain good mental health and even prevent mental illness?

Ryan: Well, I would look again, just echoing off what Travis said. Looking at all those areas of our life, our physical wellbeing is so connected to our emotional and our mental wellbeing and our spiritual wellbeing. I would say all three. To make sure that I'm spending some time just sorting through my emotions, accepting them, sharing them, finding connection with other people.

The spiritual disciplines we learned about growing up that we talk about often: time in the word, time with other believers, and meditation. And then the physical, like Travis said. Just that physical exercise. As much as I am energized by being alone because I am an introvert, I know that I need social interaction. So, I have to be disciplined to actually do that because my default is home, rear end on the couch, watching college football, life is good. So, I need to make sure I'm disciplined to be around other people.

Pam: I think too, to add to that, the enemy wants us to be isolated and the importance of connection and community, like we talked about, Ryan. I think, too, of the scriptures Psalm 91: 4 about staying close to the Lord. ***He will cover with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge. His faithfulness is a shield and a buckler.*** So, staying close to the Lord.

Travis: I think something that gets overlooked is sleep. We have to pay attention to the amount of sleep that we're getting, the duration, the environment of our sleep. It can get overlooked and yet it's so important to the mental health factor as well as the physical health factor and the way they tie in, like I said.

The cognitive ability that diminishes with lack of sleep... Sleep is both our physical and our mental reset. There are different stages of sleep that I won't get into, but part of the early stages of sleep are your physical reset where your body is healing from the day's literal physical trauma. Later on, as you get into what you may have heard of as REM sleep, that Rapid Eye Movement sleep, that's when your brain is literally storing away thoughts and memories and processing things. The average adult needs between seven and eight hours of sleep a night and when we are cutting off around the five or six hours, you're not getting the mental reset and that's where, in our brains, part of our physical being that obviously is highly tied into or emotional and mental being, is not getting the reset that it needs. So, sleep is very important.

Ted: When we shared with the church that we were going to be talking about this today, I knew there were many people in our church who have lost loved ones to suicide, but it was probably the number one message, email message or private message that I received. And I didn't know that there were many in our church who have lost more than one family member to suicide. It's the reason we're talking about this.

One, we want to remove the stigma. Pam just said it. Isolation isn't healthy for anyone. So, what do we do? How can we help those who have suicidal thoughts right now, who are thinking, *No one knows what I'm going through, this cloud that you described earlier has been over me for years or my whole adult life. I've never been able to find a way out. No church has helped me, no counselor has helped me, no friend or family member has helped me.* Let's start with what is helpful. What is helpful for me to say to someone I love who is thinking about ending their life? Knowing that is no solution at all; we're very clear about that. That is zero solution. There is a way out. What's helpful for me to say? I mean actual words, talking points.

Pam: I think number one is if you've noticed some changes in someone you love, whether it's being isolated, sleeping more, lack of interest in things like we talked about, don't be afraid to ask that question, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" There is a myth out there that goes around that

you're going to put that thought in their head, but that's not true. We need to ask them, "Are you thinking of this?" And make sure they know how much we care about them and how significant they are in our lives and that we care that they're hurting.

Ryan: Absolutely. I totally agree. Just that ministry of presence is powerful. I would refrain from giving unsolicited advice, and just practice in that empathetic being with. I kind of liken the difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is kind of from a distance: "Good luck with that." "Here's some advice." "Hopefully you feel better." Whereas empathy is really sitting with somebody in their pain and saying, "Yeah, I can see this and it looks really, really awful." Just be willing to sit with somebody in that. I would even remove the tendency to try to fix it for them. But rather just sitting with them could be extremely powerful.

Ted: And your analogy with heart disease...

Travis: Yeah, I think it's important for us to understand the severity of it and the potential severity of mental illness. I liken it to... A major heart attack is to heart disease so as suicide to depression. The complication of the condition that can culminate in a death and the death is suicide. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among those age 15 – 34. We know that half of us, at some point in our life will suffer from mental illness. I think as far as what to say, to answer that question, I think it depends on the relationship, to have a relational privilege with someone to be able to speak into it is important before you start giving advice about what they maybe should do about their mental health.

Pam: And really seeking the Lord before you know that you're going to meet with someone because he knows their heart better than anybody else, so asking him, "How can help this person? What can I do?"

Ted: I'm going to say that the majority of us in here are not comfortable with asking that question, knowing it needs to be asked, but asking for help for courage, like courage to say it. You used the term "lean in" however uncomfortable it is.

Ryan: Well, one of the things you could do that would be most beneficial, and it may sound kind of counterintuitive, to helping somebody that's in that place is making sure you're taking good care of your own self, saying, *Okay what is it that makes me uncomfortable about this. You know, What is going on in my heart when I see somebody else struggling. Do I feel helpless? Am I feeling kind of powerless right here?* Making sure you're not ignoring your own heart because a well-cared for you is going to be the best at caring forth somebody else. So, I did not answer your question.

Ted: Yeah, you did. I think all of this is helpful, but equally important is what is unhelpful. I mean, we have our Christian clichés. It's true, but a lot of it isn't scripture; they are statements of a denomination or a church or history. Tradition has given us what we feel, *This is going to really help them out of this that they're in*, so give practical examples of what not to say, what to hold back on when someone is dealing with depression and you know they would answer the question probably... You said it. Don't ever be worried about asking that question, "Are you thinking of taking your own life?" Because, more than likely, they have if they are at that place. You're not putting that thought in their head. But once we know they are at that place, what should I not say?

Ryan: One more thing to say in that situation is “Do you think that you are in a safe place?” And if they say no, then you may need to be that safety for them. Then, if you can even just get them to commit to you to not hurting themselves for the next 48 hours until they can get some professional help. I think that could be very helpful. What you don’t want to say to them is you definitely don’t want to make it a matter of a lack of faith. You know, “If you only had more faith.” Travis said it earlier today; it’s not always a faith issue; it’s a mental wellness issue. I don’t think you want to say, “If you only would pray more, maybe you wouldn’t feel this.” That may be true, but it’s not necessarily going to be helpful.

Pam: That brings up that shaming, like you were talking about, Travis. You know, just helping them to know how significant they are in your life. “You’re important to me. I care about this. What can I do to help you?” Because they are the expert on their heart so maybe asking them, “How can I help?” And asking them, “Can I have permission to pray with you now?” Instead of just, “I’ll pray for you later.” If they are open to that.

Ted: Those were two of my favorite things from last service. You were talking about honor. We say honor is recognizing we don’t set people’s value; it’s already set in the Imago Dei. They are made in the image of God, so we are recognizing it to remind someone of their value and their value to you. And then you talked about the asking permission for anything you’re about to say, that’s a big deal.

Ryan: Yeah, “Are you open to hearing my perspective? Are you open to some advice? Are you open to some scripture that I’ve come across that could be helpful?” It’s amazing how asking can just open that up.

Travis: The shaming is one we talked about a lot. Like you said, we esteem people as highly valuable. Every person is a human being with eternal value created in the image of God, knitted together in their mother’s womb. And having that image of them is important. As we consider what we’re saying, I think we can be quick to spout out a cliché, like you said, or something that we read on a post.

Something that I’ve seen that I’m not a fan of is that worry is temporary atheism. For someone who deals with anxiety with constant low level worry that sometimes culminates in a full on panic attack, for them to hear that and be struggling already and to hear that maybe they don’t have faith, that’s just pushing them farther down a slippery slope. So, be careful about the words you choose to say, and think, *is this esteeming as highly valuable or is this potentially shaming*. We don’t worry because we don’t have faith; we worry because we’re human. We are created in the image of God, broken by our sin nature.

Ted: And I know, especially if this is something someone has struggled with for a long time, a family member can become fatigued and be like, “You should be over this by now.” “If you’re not going to help yourself, it’s not going to get better.” “If you do the same thing, you’ll get the same results.” We say all of that thinking this is going to really be the shot in the arm they need to go see somebody and it’s damaging.

Ryan: And usually, those statements are coming not from a place of care, but from a place of fear or fatigue. *I don't know if this is ever going to get over, so I need to try to get you to try to fix this or get better with this.* And so that's just watching your own heart as a caregiver: *Oh, man, am I feeling fatigued right now? Am I feeling fearful because anything I say is going to come out of that heart verses out of a heart that is cared for and full?*

Pam: That's where it's really important to know, *Do I have the emotional capacity for that at this minute. Is my heart well cared for that I can do that?* And then keeping that relationship open, keeping that connection. It's important.

Ted: Final thought, a passage. Maybe go around. You all are constantly sharing scripture with your patients and with your clients. Just for encouragement, for hope as we walk out of here today.

Travis: I think Psalm 23 is, for me, kind of the most comprehensive, just hope filled passage that the Lord is with us and he helps us. He gives us hope. He restores our soul.

Pam: Mine would be Psalm 33: 20 – ***We wait and hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.*** He is always waiting right there just wanting for us to come to him and wanting for us to seek his help.

Ryan: There are so many scriptures that just validate pain, that just let you know this is part of life; pain is part of life. And a couple of my favorites... One would be Psalm 61: 2 where David says, ***1 Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. 2 From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.*** And then I just love the entire Psalm 40, which is just David crying out to the Lord saying, ***I waited patiently for the Lord. He turned to me and he heard my cry.*** So just validating these feelings, these emotions are natural, they're valid, but we do have a place to turn for that.

Ted: As we close out this morning... This is for all those online as well. We obviously can't do counseling on a Sunday morning, but our prayer team is going to come to the front right now and be available. We want you to know that counseling might not be available this morning, but it is available through our church. I'll be honest with you. We have scholarship money that we budget... Travis and I were just talking about this at just the number of people, just the amount of resources we have available that are not used by the end of each year, and the help is here.

The big thing about today is we want to remove the stigma. We want to talk about it. We want you to know there is help available for you. The prayer team would love... If you are mourning the loss of someone today, if you're struggling with anxiety, worry, depression, if you have had suicidal thoughts, please come down and meet with someone from the prayer team. They will point you in the right direction this week because we know that yes, this is the time of year where we sing about joy and we sing about peace on earth, but for many it's a dark time.

So, today, as I invite you to stand as we close in prayer, I want to encourage you, please don't leave here if you're struggling in any of these areas. Come down and meet with somebody from our prayer team and they would love to meet with you and give you next steps for help.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that I pray first for family members who have lost someone this year, for family members in years past that have lost someone to suicide and the pain. I pray that they are not living today with the regret and that they leave here not living with regret or shame or fear, but with the life they have in you.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, that today would be the day that they would confess with their mouth and believe in their heart that Jesus is Lord and that he has been raised from the dead. I just pray that life is breathed today into folks who have struggled for a long, long time with this.

We grateful for how you continue to use this church. May Woodland Hills Family Church be known as a church that every struggle, every person who is struggling is welcome here. Give us the resources from people and finances and everything we need to meet all the needs that walk through this door and call this place home and for those who are guests.

We pray all of this in the mighty and matchless name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.