

Engage360 | Episode 31: Responding Faithfully to the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Hello again from Denver Seminary. This is Engage360. I'm your host Don Payne. And we're, as always, very grateful that you've joined us this week. We will take a brief pause from our normal interview schedule to discuss a bit what's on everybody's mind, the COVID-19 virus, and what does it mean to respond faithfully to this as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of you listening will already have benefited, I'm sure from wise godly perspectives on how to live faithfully with threats and disruptions caused by COVID-19 and will not pretend to be the only or even a major voice in that choir. But we do want to address the challenges presented by this world crisis. So this week we'll pause, as I said, our regular interview so that we can give these matters some attention. Now, it may not be the last time we do so or need to do so. But nor will we allow these threats to dominate our thinking more than it has a right to do. So that could be another maybe reverse form of unfaithfulness to give these things more power than they deserve. But to give us some perspective on all of this, we're joined again by our President, Dr. Mark Young and by Dr. Heather Gingrich from our counseling faculty. So Heather and Mark, welcome back to Engage360.
- Dr. Heather Gingrich: Thank you.
- Dr. Mark Young: Yeah, thanks.
- Dr. Don Payne: I suppose the overarching theme or focus of this episode we could call living with COVID-19 in an age of fear. And even with some of the craziness that's going on around us like hoarding, it's encouraging to me to see so many people in our society rise to the occasion with balanced perspectives on the fear and the risks created by COVID-19, but with that acknowledgement we still need to think about all of this theologically, to think about it in light of God and what God has revealed and what God does redemptively. So we need to send the probe even deeper than our culture is able to do, in order that we can anchor our lives and our service on what underpins even the helpful resources that we find out there in the broader culture. So I want to begin this conversation with the two of you. I'm asking you to reflect maybe more broadly and specifically on all this. So, we occupy a time, a period of time, when anxiety even as a diagnosable condition is quite pervasive. What do we need to be aware of about this widespread phenomenon of anxiety and how it affects the way people are responding to a situation like COVID-19, Heather?
- Dr. Heather Gingrich: Well, of course people who are already struggling with anxiety are likely to struggle even more. But then again, people who normally are pretty calm about things, you know, this is something new for many people. And I think part of that is, is that none of us are necessarily exempt from the danger. You know, it's

worldwide, and there is no absolute guarantee of not being infected. And I think that that increases the anxiety. But you know, one of the things I've been thinking about as a thought about this podcast is vicarious traumatization. And that's a concept that's used to describe someone who has not been traumatized themselves, but is hearing about someone else who's been traumatized or either witnessing or even on social media or on the media. And this was something that was very prevalent with 9/11, for example. The number of times, the hundreds of times some people viewed those towers coming down. And so I do see that as a danger with this is that if people are constantly checking the news, you know, social media, it can become just all encompassing. And so I think that one of the things that we can do is just use some caution, you know, learn what we need to learn in order to find out what's going on. But don't be looking at the news 24/7 or social media with respect to what's happening here.

Dr. Don Payne: Mark, your thoughts?

Dr. Mark Young: I think this scenario plays out in different arenas than just health, right? Health as the primary threat. We're afraid of contracting the virus and then those that contracting the virus turning into this disease. But we also have tremendous anxiety in relationship or uncertainty in relationship to the financial markets. We have uncertainty as to whether our society as a whole is going to be able to hold together. Whether the institutions that we depend upon, our governments, our schools and other institutions, we all are a part of, are strong enough and resilient enough to be able to withstand a threat to the broad population. Or culturally, whether we are people who are willing to make the sacrifices that are necessary. So all of that combined to create an overarching sense of uncertainty. And for many of us, our uncertainty then can lead to anxiety or then even to stronger reactions of fear or stress. I think that's a little different than what we've typically experienced as a people, because we've been insulated by our wealth, by our, by our general sense of wellbeing, that many experience. And I mean relative wealth in relationship to many people around the world. So that I think is something we need to be aware of. It's not just the disease, but systemically, how it creates a vision of life that a lot of us don't know how to navigate or don't want to navigate as we envision what may happen in the weeks and months ahead.

Dr. Heather Gingrich: I think that's a really good point because you're right that here in North America, very often we have had much more control over things than people in developing nations, for example, have. So as a missionary in the Philippines for eight years, and natural disasters for example, happen numbers of times a year and people, it's kind of learned that, you know, we can't control the weather and we somehow have to cope. And all kinds of other dangers that are there and people kind of learn that nothing is really safe. That there's a lot that's unknown. We can't control everything. Well, we're used to controlling a lot of our lives here and that unknown and that lack of control is really difficult. And new for some people.

Dr. Mark Young: It is. Certainly we do have a measure of control because of the, again, the prosperity of our nation and the stability within which we live. But a lot of our feelings of control are really illusory, aren't they? Right. We really don't have the levels of control that we like to think we have. So we insulate our feelings by believing in an illusory control.

Dr. Heather Gingrich: Exactly.

Dr. Mark Young: Right. And then when something happens and all of a sudden that's gone, the illusion is shattered. Then we find ourselves, I think in two places. One, do I have the personal fortitude, the emotional resilience to step into uncertainty. But I think for us too, as believers, we're often asked, do we have the theological grounding to step into this uncertainty with a clear set of convictions that will allow us perhaps or help us perhaps gain a bit more intellectual and emotional clarity and stability in the face of a threat like this?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. It's that theological grounding that I want us to explore a bit more, not an abstract technical terms, but in very practical terms of what does it mean to have our confidence, even our fears and anxieties rooted somewhere so that they do not have a role in our lives that God does not intend for them to have. I know that I've seen and heard a number of Christian leaders in recent days speak from Philippians 4, 6, and 7. Paul's really famous words. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with Thanksgiving, present your requests to God and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Those are really great words. And I wonder sometimes whether those words get construed as implying that we should be devoid of any sort of anxiety or fear whatsoever. And then when we don't experience the complete absence of any anxiety, we wonder whether we're trusting God properly. You know what I'm talking about? You want to comment on that? What does it mean either from that or maybe from other texts to anchor even our inner disruption in the Lord so that that anxiety is not the controlling reality. What does that look like?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, I think one of the interesting challenges we have in applying that verse and living it out is we tend to develop a way of thinking that if we entrust it to the Lord, then it's going to turn out the way we want it to turn out. So that piece that Paul promises, is it based on the fact that we think God's going to give us what we want or do what we want? Or is it based in the simple privilege of being able to entrust it to a God who we know loves us as his children, whom we know seeks his will and will execute his will and his purpose in the world. So is peace coming from the entrusting part or from what we believe God's going to do? And I would argue Paul's point is the former. It's that privilege we have of in trusting our cares to a God whom we know. And in that there is the possibility of peace, even if we don't see the resolutions that we would expect or want right off the bat.

Dr. Heather Gingrich: This does remind me of someone I saw for counseling when I was in the Philippines that I've actually written up in a published case study and I called her

Ami in the case study. She was in a very, very difficult situation where she was a missionary to one of the Southern Islands where there were Muslim extremists, and witnessed her traveling companion, a friend of hers being basically executed at close range. And then went on to their village where her life was threatened and she would come out to Manila where I was and we would talk about what does she do with the fact that these are very real threats. You know, the woman who was killed was a Christian, you know, God didn't stop that from happening. And God doesn't stop a lot of things from bad things from happening to us. And God really intervened in a kind of miraculous way. Giving her what she needed to have that sense of peace. He gave her a dream. In that dream, she viewed her resurrected body upon death, and she came into our next session and went, you know, the very worst thing that could happen, Heather, is that I die and be with Jesus. And you know, while that may seem trite to some people for her, it really freed her. You know, the reality is, is that if we know Christ, we know that we will ultimately be with him. And that doesn't mean that we look, you know, have death wishes. I think that we do everything we can to be safe, to protect ourselves, to feed our families, to keep them safe, to keep ourselves safe. But the reality is, is that we are promised that God will be with us in that process. And that ultimately in kind of the very worst case scenario, at least for many people, which would be death of this earthly life, that will be with him. So that may be helpful for some people. Others may go, that doesn't seem very comforting, you know? But I think.

Dr. Don Payne: But it does go to show how much weight we place on this particular life. Right.

Dr. Mark Young: That's very true. And I think this whole concept of being with God extends from our sense of certainty of being with God and eternity to the strong conviction that God is with us in this crisis as well. And that the whole question of the defeat of evil, one of the ways we know that's true is that God is with us, that God continues to walk, continues to be present. Maybe we should just think to Don about, and Heather, some of the ways that we misconstrue a situation like this virus. So I'm pretty sure at some point someone's going to come out and say this is God's judgment on America or God's judgment on the world. And so some people unfortunately will see this as God directly intervening to punish. We saw this with Katrina or other hurricanes and natural disasters. I think that's a very speculative, I would be very cautious about listening to those voices and assuming that there's something there that's latching on to. And then if someone gets the disease, they may have a friend or someone who knows them, say, well, clearly you have unconfessed sin in your life. You haven't repented. And so that's why you have COVID-19. Again, I think that's speculative to the point of being foolish or harmful. So I think we need to be very careful not to allow ourselves to enter into false theological conclusions about what it means to live in the midst of a pandemic. I love the phrase you've, I learned from you the tragic consequences of the fall. And so a virus, something that destroys life, that that's all a part of the fall of creation, that denigration of creation that occurs in the garden, through human rebellion. It's not God sending the virus to us or inflicting us with disease would be my, my first point

of reference. But we live in this fallen world. So what's our comfort? God is with us.

Dr. Don Payne: And the God secures a destiny. He also cures, an ultimate outcome that supersedes this again as you both pointed out that that can sound cheap or trite. But it is far from that. And I think those in many other parts of the world, or even in our parts of the world who have suffered desperately, almost indescribably, and can give voice to how the presence of God has been real and has been significant and has been sustaining. We need to hear those voices in times like this, not merely to assure us of a certain outcome as you said, Heather, but to assure us of what is or remind us perhaps of what is really significant during a time like this, where does our focus, where should our focus veer?

Dr. Heather Gingrich: I think too, we need to be careful not to feel guilty if we do feel fear, you know, because God is with us, but he also knows us and understands where our fear comes from. So I think expecting us to be at a place where we aren't, isn't realistic, and feeling guilt or shame about that only complicates matters. So I think part of that God being with us is saying, Lord, you know that I'm anxious. You know, how afraid I am. Help me to trust you more. Help me, you know, help me to survive this moment.

Dr. Don Payne: Yes, we have some beautiful illustration. I'm sorry, but don't we have some beautiful illustrations of this with David crying out to God. He's surrounded by enemies. People are actively working to his for his discretion, destruction. And he just pours his heart out. Yes to the Lord, his fear, his anxiety, his anger at times. And so I think that's another tremendous privilege that we can be honest with our heavenly father, with our savior, with the Holy spirit, about our feelings, knowing that we're not going to be judged or we're not going to be condemned because we have these natural, these responses I should say, to what's going on around us.

Dr. Heather Gingrich: I love the Psalms for that reason. You know, because we very often feel what the Psalmist does and that's part of scripture. So if the Psalmist could feel those things and express them to God, we can too.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Mark, what are a few of those key Psalms that you would point people toward?

Dr. Mark Young: Well, I think a Psalm 91 is a good example of a Psalm where David is feeling imminent threat and confesses both the threat and the certainty of God's presence. Psalm 56 is another that my wife and I were reading and reflecting on and praying through. I think there are over 60 Psalms that have some dimension of lament where these feelings of anxiety or fear or sadness are poured out before God. And if that's the case, as you said, Heather, then I certainly would think we as well are called to do that. When we bring our requests, as Paul says, we're bringing our anxieties, we're bringing our worries, we're bringing our fears

and we're laying them before God and finding in knowing he's hearing, a piece that in another place Paul says, surpasses understanding.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, man, that Heather you, you spoke about so well with respect to the honesty before the Lord that this is how I feel.

Dr. Heather Gingrich: You know, there are a couple of websites that I'd like to point our listeners to. That one is the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College. They have on their website, you can just Google it, they have a bunch of resources. I'll just name, you know, a few of the titles of some of them. Is your church ready for the Coronavirus? Another one, How to Stay Emotionally Healthy During the Coronavirus Outbreak. How We Respond to the Coronavirus Outbreaks May Depend on What We Want from Religion. I mean, so they have both things that they have put together as well as links to what's been written in various Christian magazines and all over. So I'd really recommend that listeners pay attention to that.

Dr. Don Payne: What is it again?

Dr. Heather Gingrich: The Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College. And then another one I just heard about this today is from the American Bible Society. So if you just go to the American Bible Society website, there is a free download that's called Beyond Disaster. Now, interestingly enough, they had put this together before the Coronavirus and were going to release it now and they're just recognizing, wow, the timing of this is really pretty amazing. But they're really taking a look at, you know, scripture verses and spiritually and emotionally, how can I be healthy? It's just, it's, you know, like a little booklet. But that is a free download and it looks really helpful as well

Dr. Don Payne: As we kind of draw our conversation to a close. I'd love to hear your reflections for a moment or two about what the gospel uniquely provides as well as implies for our redemptive engagement with the needs of the world during a time like this. How do we think redemptively about engagement with the needs of the world given this context in light of the gospel?

Dr. Mark Young: I think there's a really profound question that Michael Frost has asked the church to ask itself. And that is, are we living a questionable life? Now you have to listen to that a couple of ways, right? Because questionable could mean dubious or not trustworthy. But what he's saying is, are we living in a way that's different enough or distinct enough that the world is asking us about our faith? And certainly if there's a time where we as believers have an opportunity to live differently in ways that our faith informs and to be seen and heard and noticed by those who may not know Christ. It's now. So a couple of things come to mind. I think gratitude as a daily practice is a good way both for internally centering myself, as well as for reminding myself of the prosperity that I enjoy in Christ. And then that leads to desires to be generous and to engage generously with those. My wife just crafted an email two nights ago that sent to our neighborhood of 52 homes and she was simply saying, as a community, let's

come together and make sure that everyone has what they need. And if you don't have something you need ask, don't hesitate. If you run out of food or water or whatever, if you don't have supplies, just ask. And as a community, let's rally around one another. That's a bold step, but it's a different kind of step. It's, it's not the step that goes and cleans off shelves of goods that other people may need when you have plenty already. It's that willingness to say what I have, I want to serve you well. It's a tremendous time to live that way and communicate that I think.

Dr. Don Payne: My wife and I are starting in our subdivision, well, something we hope will catch on in our subdivision calling block parties where we're encouraging every block, very scalable, simply to do the kind of thing you and Priscilla are doing. Being communication, have a central communication person for the block to make needs known simply to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks.

Dr. Mark Young: Exactly. You know, this whole thing about, we just say something very practical. This whole thing about hoarding, about rushing to get supplies that you don't necessarily need, but you just want to stock up from what might be, I can think of few things that are less Christian than that. It seems to me that we're called to live as generous, open handed people. I'll tell you a little story that centered this for me. We lived in communist Poland for a number of years and everything was scarce. The systems were broken and we lived there during a time when there was very little in the stores. So one of the great treats that you could find sometimes was a particular kind of juice that would provide vitamin C in the winter because the sun never shined, never shown. So we went to the store one time, the juice was there and I snatched up a cart and put it in this little basket that we had. And then snatched up a second carton and put it on top. And my six year old said to me, well daddy, shouldn't we leave some for the other people? Wow. Ouch. Ouch. So the instinct to take what I think I'm going to need regardless of what may be happening around me is very natural. We're called to live above natural.

Dr. Don Payne: Good word to end on. Heather. Mark, thank you for your wisdom. Listeners, we want to stay in touch with you. We hope that you will email us podcast at denverseminary.edu. And if you would like let us know how we can pray for you. We take that seriously and will indeed do that. Again, we do not pretend to be the only or even the major voice in this, but we do want to contribute in whatever way to your encouragement, to your perspective and hopefully, we will all come out of this knowing how better to trust the Lord, live faithfully, and love each other well, redemptively in Jesus name. Thanks for being with us. We will be back with you again next week. Hope we'll be back with us. On behalf of everyone here at Denver Seminary, we want to thank you and want to wish you both safety but also wisdom, and the encouragement to stay engaged. For Engage360 in Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host. We'll talk to you again soon.