



Catalog No. 1942

Luke 12:13–34

42nd Message

Brian Morgan

November 24, 2013

# THE CURE FOR ANXIETY

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

In our text today Jesus will tackle one of the most pressing issues in our modern world—*anxiety*. N. T. Wright observes,

The modern Western world is built on anxiety. You see it on the faces of people hurrying to work. You see it even more as they travel home, tired but without having solved life's problems. The faces are weary, puzzled, living with the unanswerable question as to what it all means. This world thrives on people setting higher and higher goals for themselves, and each other, so that they worry all day and all year about whether they will reach them. If they do, they will set new ones. If they don't, they will feel they've failed. Was this really how we were supposed to live?<sup>1</sup>

## I. Consider What Anxiety Produces (Luke 12:13–21)

### A. A Family Dispute (vv. 13–14)

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” (Luke 12:13–14 ESV)

As we pick up our story in Luke 12, Jesus has been instructing his disciples on the opposition that awaits them on their journey to Jerusalem. Jesus assures them that, though the hostility and intimidation would be intense, they need not “be anxious” about what they are to say in their defense, for the Holy Spirit will inspire them with a courageous witness. Before Jesus can conclude his teaching, someone in the crowd abruptly interrupts him and directs him to rule on his behalf in a family dispute—“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Kenneth Bailey gives us essential cultural background to help us interpret the parable: “The father had died without a will and the younger brother is petitioning Jesus to press his older brother into making the division. Apparently the older brother did not want this to happen.”<sup>2</sup> The result is that the harmony in the family has been disrupted and is at a standstill. Settling estates is seldom achieved without family conflict, but in Israel land represented more than potential income stream; it was a sacred possession that was never to be bought or sold.

Because of his weaker position, the younger brother needs outside help to break the stalemate. Inflamed with righteous zeal, we can well imagine that he might have been one of the ones who Luke describes in verse 1 as “trampling one another” to get a hearing with Jesus. In any case, the plaintiff believes he has “an open and shut” case (as we all do when we feel we have suffered injustice), and requires just a few minutes of the teacher's time to rule in his favor.

Imagine the shock when Jesus replies, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” (an echo of Exod. 2:14). Jesus addresses him as “man,” a jarring contrast to the affectionate “friends,” by which he previously called his disciples. Bailey comments, “the language carries strong hints of displeasure.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus refuses to submit to the man's agenda, but he will in fact render a judgment that goes

beneath the surface, exposing the evil that fuels the dispute between brothers.

### B. A Surprising Judgment (v. 15)

And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness [insatiable desire], for one's life does not consist in the abundance [surplus] of his possessions.” (v. 15)

In Jesus' mind it matters little how you divide the land, for it does not address the real issue, which is the hurtful division between brothers. Jesus did not come into the world to back our “righteous” agendas at the expense of relationships. Rather he came to reconcile all peoples to God and to one another with such love that no one would consider that any of the things that belonged to them were their own, but would freely share them with anyone in need, including their land (Acts 4:32–35). Greed is an insatiable desire that is fed by an irrational fear that one day you will not have enough. And the surplus of possessions it produces destroys life.

The principle and parable that follows will cause us to ask “What do we do with the surpluses we acquire, whether through hard work, an inheritance or gifts from others, our stock options, or providence?”

### C. The Profits of Agribusiness (vv. 16–19)

And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” (vv. 16–19)

The man in the parable is a wealthy farmer with vast land holdings. One year his land produces a bumper crop, and now he has to make a decision with what to do with the surplus, because he doesn't have enough room in his existing barns to store it. In response he dialogues (*dialogizomai*) with himself, which is tragic in a culture where the welfare of family and community life are considered sacred. As Bailey remarks,

In the Middle East, village people make decisions about important topics after long discussions with their friends. Families, communities and villages are tightly knit together...Even trivial decisions are made after hours of discussion with family and friends. But this man appears to have no friends.<sup>4</sup>

The reason for his emotional isolation is that greed causes him to be totally absorbed in self. He is the subject of every verb, the lord of every possession (“my crops...my barns...my grain...my goods...my soul”), and the sole audience of his own adulation. Greed has crippled his capacity to look beyond himself, let alone sustain meaningful relationships. As a result, his plan of action doesn't take into account the impact his actions will have on anyone else in the community. Everything is designed to profit his corporation of one.

By holding his harvest back from the market, he protects the price of his crop from plummeting with an increased supply. In order to store his harvest, he decides to tear down his existing barns and build new and larger ones, rather than using existing farmland to build more barns. In this way he doesn't risk any loss of production in future years. The economics will work extremely well for Mr. Agribusiness. Not only will it make him richer, but it will also elevate his status in the community as more and more people become dependent on him. But think how detrimental his choices are for the regional economy, not to mention the majority of the village inhabitants, who live at subsistence levels.

With his future now secure, Mr. Agribusiness throws a party for himself. Going into his cellar he takes out a bottle of the award winning Perrier-Jouët Champagne, pops the cork, pours out the bubbly and raises a glass and gives a toast to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." Unlike the psalmist whose "soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps 42:2), like an animal his soul is fully satisfied with food and drink. Bailey comments, "Assuming that 'This is as good as it gets,' he is pathetic in his isolation."<sup>5</sup> His congratulatory salute is taken from a well-known verse in Ecclesiastes, which suggests he is familiar enough with Scripture to twist it to suit his own purposes. Had he read the verse in its full context, he would have shuddered.

**There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, and apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecc 2:24-26)**

True enjoyment is found in understanding that God gives the **joy** of his presence in the midst of our toil, not by storing up endless wealth to avoid toil.

#### D. Fool's Gold (vv. 20-21)

**But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? 'So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.' (vv. 20-21)**

Before retiring to bed that night, he hears God's voice giving him a new name, "fool." The act affirms his godless character and sets it in stone. He was a fool to think he could find life apart from God, and a fool for thinking that, with his surplus of wealth, he was the master of his own fate. But ultimately he was a fool for not knowing "his soul was not his, but was on loan."<sup>6</sup> Bailey captures the subtle word play that graphically describes how the man has forfeited his life.

The word translated "rejoice" is *euphrainō*. The word for fool in this text is *aphrōn*. The *phrōn* is related to the diaphragm (*phrēn*). When you reach the point where you can relax with a great sigh of relief and expand your diaphragm you have "arrived"; you have achieved the state of *euphrainō* ("breathing well")...But God tells him that he is in reality *a-phrōn* (a "fool"). Literally, he was a person with no diaphragm left to expand.<sup>7</sup>

The fool, whose wealth destroyed his capacity to maintain an abiding human relationship, dies alone. Jesus concludes by saying that the rich man's pitiful fate will be the destiny of anyone "who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

Because the drive to find security through the acquisition of our possessions is driven by anxiety and fear, Jesus now turns to his disciples and uses the example of the rich fool as an opportunity to redirect their striving to a life that is rich toward God. The groundwork for that transformation must begin with their thinking, for a life driven by anxiety is based on an erroneous view of God. Thus the bulk of Jesus' discourse is designed to deepen their trust in the Father's gracious care and generous provision for all their needs.

## II. Transforming our Thinking (vv. 22-28)

### A. Discovering our value (vv. 22-23)

**And he said to his disciples, "Therefore [lit. "on account of this"] I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. (vv. 22-23)**

Jesus' opening command, "do not be anxious" (v. 22) highlights the predominant theme of the paragraph. The verb *merimnaō* ("to be apprehensive," "have anxiety," "be anxious," "be [unduly] concerned") occurs three times along with its related emotions of "worry" (*meteōrizomai*—"hovering between hope and fear,") and "fear." The emphasis that Jesus gives to this crippling emotion suggests that anxiety has always been an Achilles heel to our well-being as human beings. For Jesus' listeners, anxiety struck at the level of their basic necessities—food and clothing. Food gives us nourishment and vitality, while clothing provides protection for our bodies, and for those with more substantial incomes, an added dimension of beauty.

Jesus commands his disciples not to fret about the necessities of life. The reason is that "life is *more than* food, and the body *more than* clothing." Jesus is suggesting that there is something that we "eat" that is more substantial than food, and something we "put on" that gives us greater protection and fosters more beauty than the clothes we buy, but he doesn't tell us what it is. To discover what lies beneath the surface, he invites his disciples to "consider" (*katanoēō*—"to look at in a reflective manner," "contemplate") two illustrations from the realm of nature—how God feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies. The fact that the disciples must be fully engaged and use all their powers of concentration to now reflect on what they observe, indicates that spiritual transformation involves the discipline of our whole being—mind, heart and will. As most of you have probably experienced, anxiety does not go away simply by quoting a verse of Scripture or saying a quick prayer. There has to be an inner transformation that goes to the core of our heart.

### B. A lesson from the ravens (vv. 24-26)

**Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! (v. 24)**

If we take time to consider the life of ravens and compare their lot to the prosperous farmer, we would be amazed. They neither sow nor reap, nor have barns to store their food, and yet God feeds them. As Joel Green observes, "The force...of Jesus' argument is heightened by his choice of examples. A raven is a bird of prey, a rapacious and unclean bird."<sup>8</sup> If God feeds even unclean birds, how much more will he feed you, his disciples?

**And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? (vv. 25-26)**

God's provision for the ravens is a rebuke to our capitulation to anxiety. Why are we so driven and anxious to accumulate for the future, when God never stops feeding the ravens? All the toilsome labors of the rich landowner to vest his stock options didn't guarantee him a life of ease in retirement. Despite all our anxiousness we can't even add a single hour to our life. So why do we insist on worrying about everything else? Anxiety is overrated. "I think, therefore I worry."

### C. A lesson from the lilies (vv. 27–28)

**Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! (vv. 27–28)**

Next we are to consider and reflect on the lilies and how they grow. Scholars debate over which flower Jesus is referring to and have suggested several possible candidates. But he may have had no definite species in mind, as there are several varieties of flowers that burst forth in glorious profusion in springtime and adorn the hills of Carmel and the fields of Galilee. Among the most beautiful is the genus *Allium*. Dr. Ori Fragman-Sapir, the head scientist at Jerusalem Botanical Gardens, writes,

In Israel, around 45 *Allium* species grow in the wild; some are edible and while some are modest, others have beautiful flowers. All are characterized by a scaled bulb and rounded flowering heads (umbels) in which all flower stalks grow from a single point.<sup>9</sup>

As we contemplate this display of dazzling color and delicate beauty that adorns Galilee's hillsides, we are struck by how effortlessly and gloriously it appears, blanketing Galilee's hillsides with no overlord or labor force conscripted to erect it. The contrast is further heightened by the flower's short, momentary existence. Though his artwork is beyond human genius, to God it is so common that he tosses it in the fire the following morning. The implication then is, if God engages in such creative genius to adorn flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow with a glory that far outshines New York's finest fashion designers, how much more will God clothe you (i.e. with an everlasting beauty of his character)?

**I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;  
my soul shall exult in my God,  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful  
headdress,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa 61:10)**

Jesus' parting address "O you of little faith!" is highly significant. As Green observes,

Jesus' entire message here is based on the possibility that some will see with the eyes of faith what is otherwise hidden from view. Jesus can apparently locate evidences of God's generosity and care in the world all around him and can therefore counsel this alternative approach to life in this world. But what is so obvious to him is obscure apart from faith in this God."<sup>10</sup>

### III. The Call to a New Orientation (Luke 12:29–31)

**And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these**

**things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. (vv. 29–31)**

Jesus concludes his argument about the Father's care with a call to commitment. Jesus calls his disciples to adopt a new orientation that is radically different from the world around them. They are to completely abandon their anxious pursuit of basic necessities and instead orient their entire lives toward bringing God's realm to earth. Knowing how difficult this must have sounded to his disciples, Jesus adds "nor be worried," (*meteōrizomai* – "be lifted up, elevated;" the adjective *meteōros* means "hovering between hope and fear, in suspense, restless, anxious").

The reason we can utterly abandon humanity's anxious quest for security is 100% due to the character of the God we serve. Whenever a young man or woman feels the calling to leave their comfortable civilian life in order to put their life in harm's way by serving their country for a higher cause, they automatically assume that when they arrive for their first tour of duty, their basic necessities of food and clothing will be taken care of. In like manner, if you set your sights to serve the higher purposes of God's kingdom, it would bring reproach to his name if he didn't provide for your daily needs. Living this way is our witness to the world of the Father's faithful provision. The opposite is also true. When we live like the rich farmer and achieve financial success at the cost of relationships, God's love is muted in the world.

Having issued the call to seek his kingdom, Jesus concludes by explaining exactly what that entails.

### IV. What Exactly Do We Do? (Luke 12:32–34)

**Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (vv. 32–34)**

Everything Jesus has been saying has been building to this one moment and he lays his cards on the table. What does it really mean to be rich toward God? The answer is "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy." This final step of obedience is an act of faith, and one that puts the final nail in anxiety's coffin. It's profoundly simple and yet, even with Jesus' attempts to convince us of God's care, it is still difficult to overcome our fears and to give our investments away without anxiety and misgivings of what will happen in the future. Knowing our frailty, Jesus lays a trump card on the table. Despite their seemingly insignificant status ("O little flock"), "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Jesus says the decision has already been made—the coming kingdom is their guaranteed inheritance. If we can begin to grasp the implications of that truth, then selling our possessions and giving to the needy would seem like the most reasonable thing to do. If I discovered that I had just inherited a small village in Switzerland's Lauterbrunnen Valley and that all my immediate family, friends and relatives would be moving there within the year, I would have a radically different view of the possessions I now hold dear, and would immediately begin unloading the whole boatload.

To help us further still, Jesus gives a lesson in kingdom economics that should motivate us to get started. When we set our hearts on the kingdom and lay up treasures in heaven, that heavenly treasure is not subject to the laws that govern our earthly existence. Green explains

how this radical orientation subverts the culture of reciprocity that dominated the Roman world,

Normally, one with treasures to share does so in order to place others in his or her debt; gifts are given in order to secure or even advance one's position in the community. Inherent to the giving of gifts in this economy is the obligation of repayment... The Empire was an intrusive, suffocating web of obligation, with resources deployed so as to maintain social equilibrium, with the elite in every village, town, city and region, and of the Empire as a whole given esteem due to them in light of their role as benefactors. If God, and not the emperor, is identified as the Great Benefactor, the Patron, and if people are to act without regard to cycles of obligation, then the politics of the Empire is sabotaged.<sup>11</sup>

In the kingdom, we give to others in need, recognizing that all of life is the gift of God. He is the great benefactor who provides both for the giver and for the recipient. Such giving has the effect of not placing the poor in our debt, but rather welcoming them into the inner circle of one's family. When Jesus speaks of "laying up treasures in heaven" he is not referring to treasure that we will possess only after we die, but that we will also enjoy now. As we bring God's kingdom life of grace and generosity to bear on our greedy world, we inherit treasures more valuable than gold in the birth of new relationships that outlast death.

As we enter the holiday season, one of the most stressful times of the year, I would like to leave you with a proverb to help you not become a victim of anxiety.

### A Rabbi's Proverb for Christmas Shoppers

The *more* we have  
the *less* we value what we have  
the *more* anxious we become managing what we have  
the *less* time we have for relationships,  
the *more* isolated we become

Conclusion: **More is less**

The *less* we have  
the *more* we value what we have  
the *less* anxious we become managing what we have  
the *more* time we have for relationships,  
the *more* we have to give  
and the *more* love we receive in return

Conclusion: **Less is much much more**

1. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 151.

2. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 300.

3. *Ibid.*, 302.

4. *Ibid.*, 303.

5. *Ibid.*, 304.

6. *Ibid.*, 303.

7. *Ibid.*, 306.

8. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 493.

9. Dr. Ori Fragman-Sapir, "New Wild Garlic Species," The Jerusalem Botanical Gardens, 2012, <http://en.botanic.co.il/articles/Show/4>

10. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 493.

11. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 274, 495.