



A PRESCRIPTION FOR ANXIETY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 6:25-34

19th Message

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Recently I came across the following true story. Robert Ringer writes:

In my early 20's I had the good fortune to be introduced to a wealthy old Wall Streeter. Wall Streeter is used here of an investor who spends each day watching the ticker tape and maneuvering money in and out of stocks at hopefully opportune moments. Harold Hart epitomized a typical Wall Street success story. Struggling as a youngster, he was now a millionaire many times over. He had it all.

The biggie came one evening when I came to visit Mr. Hart to do a deal. When I arrived, I found him resting tranquilly in his favorite chair, with servants waiting on him hand and foot. I sat there awhile waiting as he stared blankly into space. Finally, he muttered, "You know, nature has played a great hoax on man. You work all your life, go through an endless amount of struggles, play all the petty little games, and if you're lucky, you finally make it to the top. Well, I made it to the top and you know what? It doesn't mean a thing. I tell you, nature has made a fool of man and the biggest fool of all is me. Here I sit, in poor health, exhausted from years of playing the game, well aware that time is running out, and I keep asking myself, 'Now what, genius? What's your next brilliant move going to be?' All that time I spent worrying, maneuvering—it was meaningless. Life is nothing but a big hoax. We think we're so important, but the truth is, we're nothing."

That is an honest expression of despair from an unbeliever whose life did not add up.

Ron Ritchie once shared a story about a funeral he conducted for a young man who rode with a motorcycle gang in San Francisco. The man had grown up in Mexico among the Tarahumara Indians and he never adjusted to life in the United States. One night he was killed in a street fight. The funeral was held in the Santa Cruz mountains, and the service was filled with bikers. Ron said that afterwards, one man said to him: "I got a put, a pad, and an old lady, but I ain't got no peace." His words speak for many people who, as Thoreau put it, "live lives of quiet desperation."

Jesus gives an answer for that kind of life in the passage we will look at this morning from his Sermon on the Mount. If you are living a life of quiet desperation today, I pray that the words of our Lord will speak to your heart. Jesus knew that all human beings are seekers. We all need something to live for, something to

give meaning to our existence, something on which to set our hearts and minds.

In that sense we are all ambitious. Ambition is what makes us tick. It reveals the mainspring of our actions, our inner motivation. Yet many people do not understand that no matter what we achieve or acquire, we always have that thirst for something more. The Rolling Stones said it in a song: "I can't get no satisfaction." We have that thirst because the thing we are searching for is in reality nothing more or less than God. Our seeking is a stirring of absolute need: our need for God. As Augustine discovered, having searched almost forever for satisfaction in this world: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

That is what Jesus is saying in the sixth chapter of the gospel of Matthew.

We need to understand the connection between the passage we will be looking at today and the one preceding it, which we looked at last week. Too often this passage is read on its own, isolated from what has gone before. If we do this, we will miss the significance of the introductory, "Therefore I tell you." In Bible study, when you see a "therefore," you should always ask what is it there for!

Jesus is saying that because transient, earthly treasures do not satisfy, a choice must be made between God and money. The Kingdom of God demands unswerving allegiance to its values, therefore do not worry, do not be anxiously consumed with material things.

Anxiety is Jesus' concern in this paragraph. Three times he repeats the prohibition, "do not be anxious" or "do not worry" (verses 25, 31, 34). And the anxious preoccupation he forbids concerns food, drink and clothing: What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? This is the world's trinity of cares.

It will be helpful to clarify what Jesus is prohibiting. He is not forbidding thought. He even encourages reflection by telling us to look at the birds and the flowers and think about how God looks after them. Neither is he forbidding forethought. We mentioned last week that Scripture commends the ant. Birds also make provision for the future. They build nests, incubate their eggs and feed their young; some birds even store food. So there is nothing in Jesus' words to discourage Christians from making plans for the future or taking sensible steps for their own security.

John Stott concludes: "No, what Jesus forbids is neither thought nor forethought, but anxious thought. It is the same word used of Martha, who was 'distracted' (anxious) with much serving; of the good seed sown among thorns which was choked by the 'cares' (the anxiety) of life; and by Paul in his injunction, 'Have no anxiety about any thing.' As Bishop Ryle expressed it: 'Prudent provision for the future is right; wearing, corroding, self-tormenting anxiety is wrong.'"

Jesus gives several reasons in this passage why worry is incompatible with the Christian life. I will point out three:

First, it is unworthy.

Matthew 6, verses 25-26

"For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and {yet} your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? (Matt 6:25-26, NASB)

John Stott summarizes this well: "Worry betrays a false view of human beings. It is as if we were merely bodies that needed to be fed, watered, clothed and housed. It is as if human life were merely a physiological mechanism needing to be protected, lubricated and fueled. An exclusive preoccupation with food, drink and clothing could be justified only if physical survival were the be-all and end-all of existence. Then sustaining the body would be our proper first concern." That is why it is understandable that in emergency famine conditions the battle to survive must take priority over other things. But in ordinary circumstances for this to be so downgrades man to the level of animals, birds and plants.

And yet the majority of advertisements in today's newspaper and on television are directed toward the body: how to feed it, clothe it, warm it, cool it, refresh it, relax it, entertain it, titillate it. This preoccupation prompts these questions: Is physical well being a worthy object to which to devote our lives? Has human life no more significance than this?

Worry denies your worth.

Jesus says, look at the birds. The birds are always taken care of by almighty God. "Are not you of greater worth than they?" asks Jesus. The question demands an affirmative answer. Aren't you worth more? Absolutely! And if God takes care of the birds, then he will certainly take care of you, because you are much more important to him than they. Jesus died for you. He did not die for the birds. But he cares for them, and he cares for you.

Worry makes us focus on the lesser things in life, things like food and clothing. But the God who gives us

life will certainly give us all the essentials for that life. Jesus' argument is from the greater to the lesser. If God gives you his Son, his greatest possession, will he not give you also all of your needs?

Secondly, worry is unproductive.

Verse 27:

"And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? (6:27)

The last word of Jesus' question could be translated either "span of life" (RSV) or "stature" (AV). It can mean either. To add a "cubit" (a little more than a foot) to one's height would be a remarkable feat indeed, although God does it for all of us between childhood and adulthood. However, the question is more likely: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" The answer is, no one. In fact, not only can you not add to your life, by worrying you can subtract from it. Stress, worrying about things that need not be worried about, is killing many today.

Jesus goes on say, in verse 34, not to worry about tomorrow. And all worry is about tomorrow, whether it concerns food or clothing or whatever. But all worry is experienced today. Whenever we are anxious we are upset in the present about some event which may happen in the future. However, these fears about tomorrow, which we experience so acutely today, may not be fulfilled. The advice we sometimes give, "Don't worry, it may never happen," is not very sympathetic, but it's true. We worry that we may not pass an exam or find a job or get married or stay healthy or succeed in some endeavor. But it is all fantasy. Many worries, perhaps most, never materialize.

So worry is not productive. In fact, it's a waste—a waste of time, thought and nervous energy. Jesus says in verse 34 that he wants us to live a day at a time. We should plan for the future, of course, but not worry about the future. "One day's trouble is enough for one day." "Each day has troubles enough of its own." So why anticipate them? If we do, we double them. For if our fear does not materialize, we have worried once for nothing; if it does materialize, we have worried twice instead of once. In both cases it is foolish: worry doubles trouble.

Worry is unworthy and unproductive.

And third, it is unnecessary.

Verses 28-32:

"And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With

what shall we clothe ourselves?’ For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (6:28-32)

Worry ignores God’s understanding of and his supply of our needs. Here Jesus continues his “how much more” line of argument. First, he used birds as an illustration of God’s supply of food; here he uses flowers to illustrate God’s supply of clothing. In both cases Jesus tells us to “look at” or “consider” them, that is, to think about the fact of God’s care for them.

If you take an interest in birds and flowers, you know that although birds neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet our heavenly Father feeds them; and that although the lilies of the field (all the beautiful spring flowers of Galilee) neither toil nor spin, yet our heavenly Father clothes them, indeed more gorgeously than Solomon in all his glory.

If that is so, can we not trust God to feed and clothe us who are of much more value than birds and flowers? Why, he even clothes the common grass, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven! As Charles Spurgeon said: “Lovely lilies, how you rebuke our foolish nervousness!”

Someone has written,

Said the robin to the sparrow:
‘I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.’

Said the sparrow to the robin:
‘Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.’

That is a nice sentiment, but it’s not completely accurate. Jesus did not say that birds have a heavenly Father, but rather that we have; and that if the Creator cares for his creatures, we may be even more sure that the Father will look after his children.

So becoming preoccupied with material things in such a way that they engross our attention, absorb our energy and burden us with anxiety is incompatible with our Christian faith. It’s unworthy, unproductive, and unnecessary. It is distrustful of our heavenly Father. It is very foolish. This is what unbelievers do. It is idolatry. We become enslaved to things designed to serve us. Our neighbors are consumed by their interests, their goods and getting ahead, but none of these things can satisfy the human heart. Eternity is written in the heart. We are spiritual beings, made in God’s image.

Jesus calls us to a higher ambition. We must have something else, something higher as the one thing which we will energetically seek. Jesus identifies this in verse 33:

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.” (6:33)

Jesus put it this way in the gospel of John:

“Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.”

In scripture, our ambitions are often described as a hunger. It is helpful to ask ourselves from time to time, “What do I hunger for?” Is it power or more money or a better house or nicer clothes or a bigger car? A better husband or wife, perhaps. We all hunger for something.

But we know that if our hungers are misdirected, then we are never satisfied. There is nothing that can satisfy us if we hunger for the wrong things. We just want more of the same. But Jesus says here that if we hunger and thirst after righteousness, then we shall be filled.

Last week I said that there are only two kinds of bread in the world, that which lasts and that which doesn’t. According to Jesus, it is far better to work for the bread that endures. The problem with most of us, however, is that we are working for the kind which doesn’t last, mere bread which temporarily fills us but eventually leaves us unsatisfied again. The problem, Jesus says, is not that we work for bread, because we have to earn a living in order to eat. The problem is that bread doesn’t last very long, and in the end does not satisfy, so it is a bad investment.

Many people today think the most important things in life are to be healthy, strong and economically sufficient. That is what life is about, and that is why we work. I hope we know better than to pass this on to our children. The philosophy of many (including some Christians) is described in this little poem:

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

It is an unworthy objective to be consumed by things that do not satisfy.

As we celebrate the Lord’s Table, the bread reminds us that Jesus is our life. “I am the bread of life,” he said. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died, but I am the true bread out of heaven.” That bread is the only thing that can satisfy us. Unlike the many things in life that leave us feeling empty, Jesus will never disappoint us. As we partake of this bread we are reminded that he is our sustenance, he is our life.

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