

How God Views Our Worrying

Matthew 6:25-34

What are you worried about today? What fills you with anxiety when you think about it long enough? I suspect that almost every one of us faces uncertainties about the future that have the potential to cause anxiety. Parents often worry about their children - their well-being and what their lives will be like in the future. It's common to have health concerns that cloud the future. Financial concerns are a constant source of anxiety for many people; perhaps some of you really don't know how you're going to make it financially. If you're in the military, you have a whole set of concerns related to deployments and reentry. Relationships can fill us with anxiety. One person is worried whether his/her marriage will make it; another person is unmarried and worries about being lonely. In this world there are many things that have the potential to cause anxiety.

Today we are going to consider Matthew 6:25-34, a passage of Scripture in which Jesus tells His disciples "Do not worry." Three times in ten verses He will say this. Generally speaking, merely telling an anxious person not to worry isn't very helpful. What is needed is often a radical change of mindset/thinking – a whole different way of framing up how you think about the future. That's exactly what Jesus does in this passage.

I find it fascinating that Jesus takes a completely different tack than most people would. Some people who find out that you're worried about something, will shift into solution mode and try to figure out a plan that you can work that will address your concerns. If finances are the problem, you can develop a budget or analyze your spending habits or consider other opportunities for income. There is certainly a place for coming up with a wise course of action. But that's not Jesus' approach in this passage. Their peace of mind wasn't based on their competence in working a good plan. Plus, sometimes we face anxieties that no plan can address.

Other people who find out that you're concerned about something will say something like, "Don't worry. Everything is going to work out fine." They will try to assure you that your fears won't be realized. Even though that's usually the case (we're worrying without cause) in this passage Jesus doesn't tell His disciples that everything will work out fine. Actually He told them that they would have trouble. He knew that things wouldn't work out fine for them from earthly standards; ten of them would be martyred because of their allegiance to Him, and John would be exiled on the island of Patmos. Their peace of mind wouldn't depend on some assurance that everything would work out fine.

In a similar way, we need to know up front that our peace of mind isn't dependent upon making a good plan and working it; our peace isn't dependent upon our competence. And we need to know that our peace of mind isn't dependent upon things "working out fine." We don't any more assurance than the original disciples that things will work out fine – financially, medically, relationally, family-wise, etc. We simply don't have that guarantee in this life.

So what is Jesus going to tell us that will give us a change of mind that will allow us to quit worrying? What could He say that would possibly give us the courage to think about the future differently? Believe it or not, Jesus says that *an understanding of our heavenly Father's care* for us can give us the freedom to quit worrying. In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus says that in the kingdom we have a Father in heaven whose care for us makes worrying unnecessary.

Can you imagine a life in which worrying is unnecessary? Can you imagine a life in which you really don't feel like you need to fret over your future? In this passage Jesus tells us that such a life is not only possible, but that it should be the norm in the Kingdom of God.

Worrying is incompatible with being children of our heavenly Father. (6:25-32)

There's a tight connection between the passage we considered last week and our passage for today. Last week we saw how Jesus challenged His disciples to have single-minded devotion to God, storing up treasures in heaven instead of treasures on earth. Jesus says in verse 25, "For this reason I say to you. . ." The connection is that those who have set aside a preoccupation with "laying up treasures on earth" will find that they no longer have to be anxious/worried about the physical necessities of life on earth. Jesus gives the overall challenge in verse 25 which He fills out in the following verses.

25 "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Throughout this passage Jesus will urge us not to "be worried about" what we will eat, drink, and wear. These are basic essentials of life; we all need food, drink, and clothing. But Jesus points out that life isn't merely about having enough food and drink and about having clothes on your body. Like the children of Israel in the wilderness Jesus wants us to understand that we don't live by bread alone (by the things that physically sustain us) but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. There is a vast reality in the kingdom of God that you will miss if you are preoccupied merely with food, drink, and clothes.

Beginning in verse 26 Jesus argues that if God takes care of birds and flowers, surely He will take care of His children who are uniquely created in His image.

26 "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?"

Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater (an *a fortiori* argument) – from birds and flowers (lesser) to humans (greater). Jesus' argument only carries weight if you have a biblical cosmology (a biblical understanding of the universe and the forces that control it).

A biblical cosmology understands that God has not only created the world and everything in it; He also sustains everything in it. There are certainly observable "laws of nature," but their existence doesn't mean that God is uninvolved. For example, Jesus said, "Your Father in heaven . . . *causes* His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and *sends* rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). If the sun shines, God has caused it to shine; if it has rained, God has sent the rain. God does this – generally speaking – through established processes that can be observed and described. But God is the One who sustains the created world.

Jesus presupposes this when He tells His disciples to look at the birds of the air. That's different from merely thinking about birds. We're actually supposed to be birdwatchers (or birders as they call themselves). And we're supposed to notice that birds have this seemingly carefree existence in which they live day by day. It's not that birds are idle or passive – they're not; some birds work harder than many humans. They build nests; they dig for worms; some stalk and

attack their prey; they migrate according to season; some birds even store food. But compared to most people, they live in the moment. They do what they're supposed to do that day and God provides their daily bread. Jesus comment is that "your heavenly Father feeds them."

Of course Jesus isn't advocating that we should be idle or passive or lazy. Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Plenty of other Scriptures tell us to work to provide for ourselves and our families; sloth is one of the "seven deadly sins." What we are supposed to learn from the birds is that we too should do what we're supposed to do today, and believe that God will feed us, that God will give us this day our daily bread.

Here's the question that Jesus wants His disciples to ponder in relation to "the birds": "Are you not worth much more than they?" Seriously. Do you believe that you are worth more to God than the birds that He feeds?

What you believe about God and about His attitude toward you radically affects how you live in this world. If you believe that you are worth more to God than the birds, then you can entertain the possibility that you really don't have to worry about the essentials of life; there's the possibility that even though this world is full of dangers, that you're safe. But if you aren't so sure that God cares for you or that He cares for you all the time, you're a prime candidate for anxiety and insecurity in this world.

Anne Lemot describes how one of her childhood friends viewed God and the effect it had on her sense of security.

Looking back on the God my friend believed in, he seems a little erratic, not entirely unlike her father - God as borderline personality. It was like believing in the guy who ran the dime store, someone with a kind face but who was always running behind and had already heard every one of your lame excuses a dozen times before - why you didn't have a receipt, why you hadn't noticed the product's flaw before you bought it. This God could be loving and reassuring one minute, sure that you had potential, and then fiercely disappointed the next, noticing every little mistake and just in general what a fraud you really were. He was a God whom his children could talk to, confide in, and trust, unless his mood shifted suddenly and he decided instead to blow up Sodom and Gomorrah. (Travelling Mercies, pp. 7-8)

If that's what you believe about God, you have every reason to be worried. God may or may not care for you today. If you feel that God's care for you is dependent on you measuring up, then you'll be very insecure in this life and anxiety will be second nature to you. But if you are convinced of God's continual, persistent love for you, you're secure and your mind can be at peace.

In verse 27 Jesus asks another insightful question:

27 "And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?

Other translations say, "'And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span?'" Worrying never addresses the concerns of our heart. Corrie ten Boom spent years in a

Nazi concentration camp. She described worry in this way: "Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear." Worrying never accomplishes anything.

When Jesus argues that we shouldn't be worried about clothing, He uses the same logic He did earlier.

28 "And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these.

Jesus urges us to actually go out into the field and observe lilies (a general term for wildflowers). Again, this will be much more persuasive than merely thinking about flowers. When the cold weather breaks and the flowers start pushing up through the soil, we'll notice that they are much more glorious than any clothes humans can produce. Jesus mentions Solomon who was known for extravagance and excess. His glory can't compare to the glory of flowers of the field. And the flowers neither toil nor spin; they don't make their own clothes; they simply grow.

30 "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!

If you don't think God has anything to do with the lilies of the field, then Jesus' logic doesn't carry any weight. But if you understand that God sovereignly clothes the grass of the field (which is so much less valuable to God than His own children), then you have to know He will clothe you. Jesus marvels that His disciples could have such little faith about these things. Remember that Jesus Himself demonstrated an ongoing dependence upon God for food and clothing throughout His earthly ministry. His disciples should learn the same.

Verses 31-32 summarize what Jesus has taught so far:

31 "Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' 32 "For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

There should be something distinctive about the way that we as disciples of Jesus face the future. We shouldn't live like "the Gentiles" – like people who don't even pretend that they have a Father in heaven. Earlier in the chapter (in 6:8) Jesus said that we don't need to pray like the Gentiles with "meaningless repetition" as if we'll be heard because we use so many words. Rather, Jesus said, our Father knows what we need before we even ask Him – so we can simply ask. Here Jesus points out that God's knowledge of our needs should *ease our minds*. We shouldn't have the mentality of children who grow up in conditions of severe deprivation (very little food and/or clothing). Jesus explicitly said that He would not leave us as orphans in this world (see John 14:18). We don't have to compulsively worry about whether our needs will be met. Our heavenly Father's knowledge of our needs assures us that they will be met.

We have to remember that this teaching on the incompatibility of worrying follows Jesus' challenge to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, not treasures on earth. Many of our anxieties don't have to do with food and drink and clothing; many of our anxieties involve maintaining a standard of living that is far above and beyond our needs. Much of our anxiety

would evaporate if we settled in our hearts that we'll be just fine if we don't store up treasures on earth.

In verses 34 and 35 Jesus makes clear that ***Worrying is incompatible with life in God's kingdom.*** (6:33-34) Remember that Jesus is talking to disciples/apprentices/students who are seeking to live their lives the way Jesus lived His life. And so we should be surprised that a preoccupation with food and drink and clothing is replaced by a preoccupation with God's kingdom and righteousness.

33 "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things will be added to you.

Jesus says, "Above everything else, seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness." We seek God's kingdom first and foremost by submitting to His reign in our own lives. Can you identify areas of your life in which God doesn't yet reign? Are there pockets of resistance in your life? In the context of not worrying, Jesus tells us to become preoccupied with inviting God into every area of our lives and submitting to His sovereign reign. As God progressively reigns in your life, seek to be used by God to extend His kingdom to others. Become preoccupied with how you might participate in the extension of God's kingdom – through friendships you already have, through ministries of the church, through pouring out your life on behalf of others. Seek first God's kingdom.

And seek first His righteousness. This is what the entire SoM is about. Jesus is explaining a type of righteousness that far surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. It's deeper and broader and encompasses every area of life. Seeking first God's righteousness means being preoccupied with praying, giving and fasting in secret, with loving our enemies, with radical truthfulness, with being purity of heart, with reconciliation, etc.

We seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness with every expectation that we will find them. Jesus will tell us in Matthew 7 that those who seek find. As we look to the future, we anticipate a deeper and more substantive experience of God's reign and God's righteousness. Consequently, worrying simply fades away. We've got other things on our minds.

But what if you're worrying about significant things (and not petty things)? How does this discussion relate to those types of concern? If you are seeking first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, you will think about those concerns in completely different terms. Even if the things you fear actually come to pass, you can rest assured that God's purposes will be furthered. Even if disaster strikes, you are secure because you've got a Father in heaven. Your life isn't limited to this world; your life is in heaven with God.

I say this because Jesus had His disciples consider worst case scenarios in Matthew 10. The conclusion was the same. He said, "Don't fear those who can only kill your body [i.e. violent, evil people]. They can't touch your soul. Fear God." Then He told them to consider (again) the birds – two sparrows that are sold for a cent. And not a single one of them falls from the sky without your Father's notice. Jesus' conclusion: "So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows." And so even if you fall from the sky – even if you crash and burn from this world's point of view – you have nothing to fear. Because God is your Father, you are safe and secure no matter what happens.

Some commentators think Jesus is being intentionally humorous in verse 34:

34 "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

You don't need to worry about tomorrow; tomorrow can worry about itself. Instead of worrying about tomorrow, live today as fully as possible. Just as we pray, "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread," we pray, "Give us grace *today* to handle *today's* troubles." Instead of worrying about tomorrow, the grace of God allows us to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness today. If day after day we seek God "today" then we'll have a life that is full of God instead of one that is full of anxiety.

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