

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 6:25-34
“Mental Health: Kingdom Style”

May 10, 2015
(6th Sunday of Easter)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIID'2: MATTHEW 6:25-34 "MENTAL HEALTH: KINGDOM STYLE"

		D'2) 6:25-34 THREE COMMANDS ON ANXIETY OVER CREATURELY NEEDS.	//Lk. 12:22-28 9 Questions, Third Discipline: Bread/Food
		a) vv.25-30 Worry Over The Basics Mocks God's Care.	Vertical Dimension, Addressed To Disciples At Root Is An Issue = <i>Debilitating</i> Anxiety
		1) v.25 Food/Drink And Clothing + 1 Question.	<i>To Disciples</i> , Jesus Is Drawing A Conclusion, <i>Therefore</i> Follows Previous Unit On Generosity, Is God Generous With Us?
25		"Therefore I tell you, do not be (over) anxious about your life.	Direct Address, (If We Serve Self/Stuff/Fear, Our Lot Is Perpetual, Paralyzing Anxiety 1 Macc. 6:10, Sir. 42:9, Worried, Fretful, Over-Concerned, <i>Sleepless</i>
Food		what you shall eat or what you shall drink	6:11*, <i>Sleepless Over Food/Clothing // Food/Clothing // Food/Clothing</i>
Clothing		nor about your body, what you shall put on.	Melkita Ex. 16:4 On Daily Bread/Trust
Food ?		Is not <u>life</u> more than food,	Greater To Lesser, 4:4, "... not live by bread alone." Reason 1
Clothing		and the body more than clothing?	(Yes) Lk. has statement, not question. QUESTION + ISSUES Fashion + Cuisine = Cultural Obsessions
		2) vv.26-30 2 Natural Examples: Birds/ Lillies + 4 Questions.	Jesus Engages The Imagination Not Idle, But Free From Anxiety! Reason 2
26	a	Look at the birds of the air:	Prov. 6:6-11, Job. 38:41, EXAMPLE 1: BIRDS/ FOOD
Food		they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.	10:29, Ps. 147:9, Birds: (Not Idle, But Without Anxiety) Trustworthy God, <i>Daily Bread: God Cares For His Creatures</i> Argues Lesser To Greater
	?	b Are you not of <i>more value</i> than they? (Yes)	Greater to Lesser 10:21, 12:12, Reassurance: QUESTION
27	?	And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?	2 QUESTIONS
28	?	And why are you anxious about clothing?	Anxiety Is Ineffectual, Reason 4
Clothing			Biblical Worldview = Genesis On Animals, Anxiety Is Futile, Actually Shortens Life Reason 3
	a'	Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;	Ps. 103:5, EXAMPLE 2: LILIES/ CLOTHING Careful Study, Meditation In Order To Learn
29		yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.	1 Kgs. 9:26-10:29, In Grandeur! Their Beauty Is Effortless
30	b'	But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the fire,	Lesser To Greater, Flowers Are Now Lowly Grass, Worthless God Decorates The Transient
	?	will he not <i>much more</i> clothe you, O men (women) of little faith (trust)? (Yes + Rebuke)	Basic Necessities: Food/Drink/Clothing, COMMAND + ISSUES 8:26, 14:31, 16:18, Lesser To Greater, QUESTION

		b) vv.31-33 Worry Over The Basics Diverts Us From Seeking God's Rule + 3 Questions.	//Lk. 22:29-31, Prohibition/Question + 2 Reasons + Command/Promise
31	(-)	"Therefore, do not be (over) anxious ,	Anxiety (Barometer) Is Reflected In Ones Speech: Listen!
	???	'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'	Most Basic Needs <i>Letter Of Aristeas</i> 140, They Are Deceived About Life
32	a	For the Gentiles seek <i>all</i> these things, b and your heavenly Father knows that you need them <i>all</i> .	Reason 1, Gentiles = Polytheistic Pagans, Worry, Gods <i>Fate/Fortune</i> Reason 2, 6:7-8, 7:7-11
33	(+) a'	But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, b' and <i>all</i> these things shall be yours as well.	New Possibility/ God's Faithfulness, COMMAND + PROMISE p.v., Gen. 1:29, If Seek God, Then Earth Is Thrown In As Well Phil. 4:6, 1 Pt. 5:7, Focus On What God Is Doing First, Then Watch Byproducts!

		c) v.34 Worry Over Tomorrow Robs Us From Living In The Present.	Matthew Only (M)
34a		"Therefore, do not be (over) anxious about tomorrow,	When Trust Is In God, Anxiety Over The Future Is Pointless See World In A New Way, Prohibition + 2 Reasons
b		for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.	World Has Not Changed; You Have! Reason 1 James 4:13-15, Anxiety-Free Is Not Necessarily Trouble-Free
c		Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.	//b. <i>Sota</i> 48b, <i>Melkita</i> on Ex. 16:4, Reason 2 What Is The <i>Real</i> World? To See God's World In A New Way? Anxiety Replaced By Trust? New Orientation

What do I do with a God who prepares meals for birds and makes flowers gorgeous? Who's in charge of my future? People look to others gods and the occult because they don't trust God's provision. What might it mean to focus on following Jesus into the kingdom of God in daily living? If I live in fear and anxiety, how can I be generous and loving? My eye grows dark; I am without light. Obeying Jesus in trusting the heavenly Father is not opposed to work and forethought. Idleness is not praised; trust is.

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 6:25-34

This thought unit is the second part of 6:19-34 and, like its parallel 6:19-24, falls into three sections, each of which begins with the same imperative, “Therefore, do not be (over) anxious...” To the first command (v.25b) is added the phrase *about your life* leading to a discussion of necessities: food, drink, clothing. To the third (v.34a) is added the specifier *about tomorrow* leading to pointed counsel on the wisdom of focusing on today and its challenges. The middle imperative (v.31a) repeats the concerns of vv.25-30 (food, drink, clothing) in three questions to draw a contrast between the Gentiles who do not know God as Father (v.32) and those who follow Jesus in seeking the kingdom before everything else (v.33). Six uses of *anxious* tie the unit together (vv.25b, 27, 28, 31a, 34a, 34b). Note also the alternation between Command/Observation (vv.25a, 26, 28b-29, 31a) and corresponding Questions (vv.25b [2x], 26b, 27, 28, 30, 31b [3x]). Those who walk with Jesus are not to be paralyzed with fear. The God who gives the greater thing (i.e. life) will give the things that sustain it. The heavenly Father who knows our needs is pledged to provide them. When we focus on the mission of seeking and spreading the rule (i.e. kingdom) of God in company with Jesus, what we need comes our way, and it can only be proved in experience.

In terms of sources, we are dealing with what scholars call *Q* (German *Quelle* = source), meaning material shared by Matthew and Luke not found in Mark. Parallel material to 6:19-24 was scattered in three places, but here in one place (Lk. 12:22-31). When comparisons are made, several things are clear: 1) Matthew has taken a single command (Lk. 12:22) and repeated it three times to create three sub-units; 2) he has taken a pair of questions (Lk. 12:25, 26) and expanded it to nine (vv.25b [2x], 26b, 27, 28, 30, 31b [3x]), three times with the addition of the word *not* so that Luke’s assertion *For life is more than food* becomes *Is not life more than food? Of how much more value are you than birds* becomes *Are you not of more value than they?* His *how much more will he clothe you* becomes *will he not much more clothe you?* The three assertions of Lk. 12:29, “And do not seek what you are to eat... drink, nor be of an anxious mind,” now become three questions, “What shall we eat? drink? wear?” (v.31b). Matthew’s universalizing tendency is seen in three uses of *all* (vv.32-33), where Luke has none. The third sub-unit beginning with “Therefore, do not be over-anxious about tomorrow” (v.34) has no parallel and is Matthew’s work based on other tradition (M). This thought unit is an example of Matthew’s editing tradition to form a unified, memorable, triple teaching on useless worry. Our trust is not misplaced.

The first sub-unit (a. vv.25-30) falls into two parts: 1) v.25: a direct address, command, specification, rhetorical question, and 2) vv.26-30: two examples from nature, each with added questions. If God cares for birds and flowers, how much more followers of his Son? Birds are ever-busy while flowers absorb from sun and soil, thus faith is both active and receptive. The second sub-unit (vv.31-33) repeats the anti-anxiety command and adds three brief questions in order to draw a pointed contrast between what pagans seek and what followers of Jesus are to constantly pursue because the heavenly Father both knows our needs and supplies them. The third sub-unit (v.34) repeats the command with the specification *about tomorrow*, a shift from immediate to future provision. Each day has new challenges; the God who knows our needs now knows them tomorrow. Planning is fine and work good, but worry is useless. Now to command an anxious person not to be so does not work, just as to urge a depressed person not to be so does not work. It’s not simply a matter of will plus effort. Commands rarely change entrenched emotions. The reasoning and questioning and chiding of Jesus prepares his followers for surprising experiences of on-time provision which increases trust. God has ways to fill uplifted hands.

MENTAL HEALTH: KINGDOM STYLE

“Are you not of more value than they?”

Jesus was not confused on the relative value of people and critters

M A T T H E W 6 : 2 6 b

Seventy years ago this week VE Day ended World War II in Europe. Allied armies soon gathered hungry, homeless children by the thousands and placed them in large camps where they were abundantly fed and cared for. But leaders soon noticed they didn't sleep well at night. They seemed restless, afraid.

A psychologist finally hit on a solution. As the children went to bed, each received a slice of bread to hold. If they wanted more to eat, it was provided, but this slice was not to be eaten; it was just to hold and produced marvelous results. A child would go to sleep, feeling they would have something to eat the next day.

David points to the same feeling when he says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." The shepherd made ample provision for grazing today, so tomorrow. The sheep lies down with, figuratively speaking, a piece of bread in its hand.¹

Years of never-enough trained children in uncertainty and cut deep grooves of anxiety into their little psyches. It was a frighteningly real world, and several good meals and a clean bed did not quickly convince them the new arrangements were permanent. Reality had changed; they were now living in the kingdom of President Truman and General Eisenhower, not the Reich of Herr Hitler. A new world had displaced the old, but their emotions hadn't yet caught up. It takes time to re-train deep emotional scripts, and a single slice of bread in the hand at bedtime was a tangible symbol of a new reality. Imagine a child in some barracks sneaking a nibble at 3am and wondering, "Who are these people who have so much and share it? Beds full of crumbs were a sign of new life and hope.

¹ Charles L. Allen, *God's Psychiatry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988).

So the question is, What about the new reality, the thing Jesus called *the kingdom of God, the rule of his Father and the Holy Spirit* which he invited his followers to pursue through him as their consuming passion? What if alongside the confusion and pain of this world as it now is— what I call *battlefield earth*— another reality is already at work making its presence known among those who believe in Jesus enough to actually start following him and being imprinted with the new reality? What if in the midst of what we call *the real world* a parallel reality exists and that the portal into this new world is Jesus of Nazareth who lived in dependence on the invisible world all the time? In John 5 he admitted as much, “Truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he *sees* the Father doing, for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise.”²

Jesus was living out of an invisible world he viewed and heard from moment-by-moment in absolute synchronicity; what he saw he did, and what he heard he said. He did it all the time, living in two worlds I mean. Fully with us at ground level on *battleground earth*, and also wide open to heaven’s resources. Divine revelation from the Father through the Spirit was part of his consciousness and emotional life. To think his own thoughts and to receive from above were not opposed. What if we could get in on it as well, even just a bit. What if we could see glimpses of the new reality in dreams and visions? What if we heard from time to time? And what if we humbly admitted we can know the new reality in Jesus and its benefits and yet still have emotional scripts from the old world that hold us back and block our believing that the God of Jesus is really this loving and this powerful and this good?

Never underestimate the intellectual and emotional challenge it was to the first disciples to be around Jesus all the time. There was nowhere to hide, and when he looked at you and smiled you knew that he knew that he knew. He looked just like another Jewish working guy from a hick village, but when he opened his mouth, Wow— what truth came forth, and when he touched people spirits of darkness left and health was restored. He made people new and alive with his words and touch. The men and women who followed Jesus lived at the interface of two clashing worlds, and wondered which was more real, a world of lack or a world of abundance?

Remember, the teaching we just read about abandoning anxiety and embracing trust were spoken by Jesus to his followers, his full time apprentices who had for some time now had ringside seats on the new reality, and if they— after the display

² John 5:19.

they witnessed day after day— still wrestled with anxiety and worry and were labeled *O men and women of puny faith*, can we join them in the messy adventure of being a follower? Is it OK to be a struggler and a wanna-be? I hope so because it makes room for me. For Jesus to repeat the command three times means it’s a big issue. They may have acted brave and confident- as men and women often do for the sake of image- but in unguarded moments emotions gave them away. He saw fear and worry on their faces and spoke to it publicly.

Now you can no more command a person not to be anxious or not to be depressed than you can command a shot person to quit bleeding. They need help and time and multiple opportunities to check out the new reality, and that’s what Jesus did. He invited twelve men to be living symbols of a new thing in Judaism, and to this he added women followers,³ and what was their purpose? To follow him as official observers as he brought the force field of God’s holy love and healing truth near enough to make a difference. Through his touch and teaching the new world of God’s kingdom was put on local display. So they watched and questioned and were amazed and were sifted and went to bed at night with heads spinning, “Which world is real?” The kingdom of Truman and Eisenhower where they put bread in little hands at bedtime, or the kingdom of the dark Lord and his henchmen under which we’ve all lived? Who rules? Who wins? What’s real? The world of disease and death and demons and starvation and religious games and never enough, or what we see in him? Jesus was and remains God’s minority report, and the question is, Is he trustworthy? Is he the one we are to follow? Can he provide for and protect us?

Worry and anxiety and dread and apprehension and existential angst and phobias of all sorts are part of our common fallen condition in an unpredictable and often hostile world.⁴ What we do with this cluster of unpleasant emotions and mental habits will in great measure determine how we live, whether in an offensive posture of active engagement with life and its challenges, or a defensive posture of protection and steady retreat. You can’t get very far in *seeking the kingdom* (an active, even aggressive posture) if you’re always on the defensive servicing your fears and

³ Luke 8:1-3.

⁴ For a discussion of anxiety and its treatment, see Mark Yarhouse, et. al., *Modern Psychopathologies: A Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2005), Chapter 5, “Problems of Anxiety,” 109-146, and on depression, David B. Biebel & Harold Koenig, *New Light On Depression* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2004).

spending all the energy of your prayers asking nothing bad ever happen. The realism of Jesus about facing anxieties is reinforced by the now thirty-five year old best-seller of Dr. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. In the opening section he writes:

"Life is difficult... a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?... (A) tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in them is the primary basis of all human mental illness.... Some of us go to extraordinary lengths to avoid our problems and the suffering they cause... to try to find an easy way out, building the most elaborate fantasies in which to live, sometimes to the exclusion of reality."⁵

Jesus was under no illusion about the mental and spiritual health of his first followers. Thomas was a born skeptic, Peter impulsive and blind to his frailties. James and John were manipulators who used their mother to triangle Jesus and beg favors; Matthew had a history of greed and disloyalty to his people. Judas was dishonest with money and vulnerable to Satan's whisperings; Mary Magdalen had once been deeply infested with evil before Jesus freed her. Mary and Martha were sisters in an rivalry over who served Jesus best. They were men and women like us: little faith and great fears. It's why he kept repeating the message, "Fear not! Do not be anxious. Live in active trust each day; it's the best way to face tomorrow."

He often did Jesus hear rumbling in the ranks, "What shall we eat and drink and wear?" He saw fear on their faces when there were crowds too big to feed, when waves threatened to sink the boat, when a particularly tough demon looked out at them through tormented eyes. Of course they were full of fear. They were doing something unconventional. They left everything to wander Galilee and go back and forth to Jerusalem with an upstart prophet because of the lure of his person and the promise of the kingdom which he taught and enacted before them in stupendous healings. Being around him dredged up every feeling and flaw imaginable, so if you want to look competent and polished, do not follow Jesus; he will wreck your plans.

Nothing about us surprises or makes him love us any less. That he repeatedly referred with gusto to his most loyal associates as *O men of little faith*⁶ is a great

⁵ (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1978), 15-17.

⁶ 6:30b, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20.

encouragement to all us beginners. It was little faith, but on the other had it was rightly placed in One who was anything but little. Better a little faith in the right object than a lot of faith in the wrong. When it comes to trust, placement is a critical. It is not the size of faith but the worth of its object that matters. Jesus said a mustard seed was enough, and that's nearly invisible. Our faith is not in our faith, and our trust is not in our trust; it's *in him*, in who he is. The more experiential knowledge we have of Jesus Christ, through reading his biographies and finding him utterly reliable, the greater our trust will be, not in ourselves but in him. So when he said to his followers, "O men of little faith," I believe it was less a rebuke than a back-handed compliment, probably delivered with a smile.

In the book *Beyond Jabez*, Bruce Wilkinson tells of a poor, older African woman who had faith in God. She lived in a mud hut and cared for 56 orphans.

A group of volunteers had arrived in Swaziland to plant gardens. On the final day of their visit, they came to her tiny home, surrounded by children. Little gardens had been dug all around the hut, but no plants were growing in any of them.

As the volunteers learned, earlier that day the woman told the children to dig lots of gardens. When the children asked why- since they had neither seeds nor money- she responded, "Last night I asked God to send someone to plant gardens for us. We must be ready for them when they come."

The volunteers came with hundreds of ready-to-plant seedlings. God sent them to the very place where one of his servants had begged for his intervening hand. The grandmother and her children were ready when the answer came.⁷

What did 56 orphans and an old, African mother learn about faith and faithfulness that day? Having workers show up to fill the children's gardens with plants made it easy to believe the words of Jesus, "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

"Therefore," said Jesus to his little-faith flock, "do not be anxious saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For the Gentiles seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them all." The promise of God's provision is not a general promise for all peoples, much as many have read it this way. It was given in the first instance to those who were already disciples, and it was given in the context of their active pursuit of Jesus and

⁷ Bruce Wilkinson with Brian Smith, *Beyond Jabez* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 2005), 147-148.

his kingdom; they were literally *on the road* together. So if you are not a follower, or if you are and are not seeking the kingdom as the first priority of life, then these promises of provision do not necessarily apply to you. To that extent you are on your own, which come to think of it, is an even more frightening place to be.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

a) vv.25-30 Worry Over Basics Mocks God's Care.

One day the German mystic Johann Tauler met a beggar. "God give you a good day, my friend," he said.

The beggar answered, "I thank God I never had a bad one."

Tauler then said, "God give you a happy life, my friend."

"I thank God," said the beggar, "I am never unhappy."

Tauler said in amazement, "What do you mean?"

"Well," said the beggar, "when it's fine, I thank God. When it rains I thank God. When I have plenty I thank God. When I am hungry I thank God. And since God's will is my will, and whatever pleases him pleases me, why should I say I am unhappy when I am not?"

Tauler looked at the man in astonishment, "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am a king," said the beggar.

"Where, then, is your kingdom?" asked Tauler.

The beggar replied quietly, "In my heart."⁸

Such stories are disturbing, perhaps because they raise more questions than they answer. They slip inside the perimeter and set off explosive charges under all worries and all our stuff. More stuff, better stuff, stylish stuff, always knowing the next rung on the upwardly mobile ladder to the earthly heaven of ultimate stuff. Alarms and insurance to protect our stuff, wills to pass on our stuff, accountants to keep up with our stuff, tax specialists to keep the government from getting our stuff. Worries to remind us of our stuff. Needing a regular fix of new stuff to keep our mood lifted and neuro-chemistry adjusted. Shopping not for things we need but just to see if anything makes an appeal, cruising shopping channels in an easy chair to see what strikes our fancy. It's a symptom of spiritual poverty and a lack of attraction to the kingdom of God. It's not that Jesus was naive; it's that we are out of touch.

⁸ Quoted in Michael Green, *Matthew* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 86

Jesus and his followers lived a stripped-down life. Having worked as carpenters and fishermen and low-level bureaucrats, they were now all jobless and unemployed, except for the demanding daily work of paying close attention to One who said, "Follow me." I know that because that is where their anxieties were housed: what to drink and eat and wear. This is the level to which following Jesus reduced them. I was precisely to men and women living with him near the edge that Jesus said, "Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life...." That's really not fair, is it? First he takes away everything in which they trusted; then he tells them not to worry about how it feels, which is extremely uncomfortable, on the verge of a panic attack! The Lord is not playing with them; he is exposing what's in them and training them in the dynamics of the kingdom of God which is walking by faith and trust when nothing is visible except needs and fears.

"Is not life *more than* food, and the body *more than* clothing?" That's the first of nine questions in this section, which means Jesus is probing. It's an inquest, and he's the interrogator. Will the God who gave *the greater thing*, which is life, not also give *the lesser things*, in this case what sustains and protects life?

Pay attention, said Jesus. Look at birds. Study them. See how active they are in seeking what God gives, but they are not anxious. You've never seen a bird punch a clock or ask for a psychiatric consult. No bird has a to-do list. God makes them breakfast, dinner, and supper. Tasty worms and such. Same with lilies. You've never seen a lily sweat over fashions or their weight. Their clothes are magnificent, more spectacular than ole King Solomon, and the next day they're fuel for the fire. Their beauty is senseless and extravagant. A God who paints fields with lilies and fix brunch for birds can take care of you, can't he? I remember a childhood poem:

"Said the robin to the sparrow,
I would really like to know
Why those anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.
Said the sparrow to the robin,
Well, think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me."⁹

⁹ David Dockery & David Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton, ILL: Shaw, 1992), 96-97.

All this counsel about birds and flowers is built on a fundamental biblical conviction, and that is while critters of all sorts are our companions, and while the plants are another kingdom, human beings have unique dignity and value above anything else God made. Jesus assumed a *Yes* answer to the question, “Are you not of more value than they?” So in the choice between a person and a plant or between a person and a critter, choose the person because that is what God does. The more valuable is chosen over the less. Critters and plants have value because they too were made by God and are necessary to the balance of this world, but we are of more value since we alone bear God’s image and likeness. We are over all else, not to exploit it but to understand and develop it with respect.

I believe, with John Wesley I might add, that the new heavens and the new earth of the coming kingdom will include animals and plants because it is not less than this world but this world utterly restored.¹⁰ Lions and lambs will play, and I am secretly hoping for a conversation with my childhood dog *Trusty*, who if I followed the Lord the faithful way he followed me as a boy, I would even now be glowing with love divine. Some eco-radicals in our world have abandoned the biblical order for a different vision in which all things are of equal value, which means that you ought to be as upset about a cracked turtle egg as an aborted fetus. We wander beaches to save turtles while pro-life pregnancy clinics lack resources. Nothing wrong with turtles, but what about human beings? The God who gave us life and installed us all in high office as superintendents surely has the power to sustain us if we trust and obey. Excessive anxiety, the kind that pulls us apart and afflicts us with sleepless nights and fragmented days, is a lie against God who has given us such dignity in creation and who has come in Christ to restore the dignity we have lost to sin and lies and evil. Corrie Ten Boom, who survived the death camps and went on to be a beloved evangelist, once offered a technique for facing worry:

"When I worry I go to the mirror and say to myself, 'This... thing which is worrying me is beyond solution. It is especially too hard for Jesus Christ to handle.' After I have said that, I smile and I am ashamed."

Not only is frantic worry an indictment against God, it accomplishes nothing. It’s destructive of good health and sanity. It doesn’t add length or quality to life, “And which of you by being anxious can add eighteen inches to his span of life?”

¹⁰ Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMHISTORY/Wesley/sermons/serm-060>.

The answer is *No one!* No one wants to be around a worrier, and I observe that men or women married to one will find ways to be away from the house.

I am thankful for new medications that help people with severe anxiety and depression; they are a God-send. They are to mental misery what morphine is physical misery. My concern is that medications alone without counseling and a plan of spiritual growth is just not as effective as the two together. Easier to take a pill than to look at your life. Now some may be more prone to these afflictions than others, and compassion is always in style, but it is the legacy of every Jesus follower—whatever the level of emotional strength— to grow in our ability to trust God in the midst of stress and to increase in the love that casts out fear. That Jesus devoted such repetitive teaching to the issue of anxiety means that he knows how deep and difficult it is to root out. The Episcopal evangelist John Guest wrote these wise words:

“When Scripture encourages us to pray without ceasing, and to cast all our care upon him, it is literally saying redirect those restless, energetic minds into a positive stream of communication with God. Turn it all into prayer! Instead of nursing wounds of self-pity, pray for the grace to forgive. Instead of worrying about those for whom we are responsible, ask God to intervene and lift the burden from our shoulders. Instead of thinking creatively about how to bring someone else down, pray creatively how to build them up. My landlady had a little wall plaque that read, ‘Why pray when you can worry? I always saw the humor of it- and the reverse psychology was good for me. It always drove me to really say, ‘Why worry when you can pray?’”

Jesus has a remedy for paralyzing anxiety. Ask where your life came from. Say No to unnecessary surplus. Believe what Scripture teaches about human dignity. Become a bird watcher; grow flowers; immerse yourself in nature. Read about the effects of stress on the immune system. Face your fears with the help of Christ and the support of other disciples. Turn the negative energy of worry into the spiritual energy of prayer. Take the little faith you have and put it in the right place. Learn to let God provide for you through normal and surprising channels.

b) vv.31-33 Worry Diverts Us From Seeking God’s Rule.

In the second block of teaching, verses 31 through 33, Jesus repeats the command against anxiety and names again the worries beneath the fear: what to eat, what to

drink, what to wear. But here his response is different. The healing discipline does not involve an immersion in nature and a rational appraisal of the futility of worry; instead, it involves an unfavorable comparison with pagans, with Greek and Roman polytheists who drive themselves crazy trying to please this and that god and are ignorant of the one God of the Jews, the heavenly Father of Jesus.

You see— as most inhabitants of the ancient world believed— if my future is already fated and lady luck the only arbitrator, then anxiety about everything is a logical response. To learn there is only one God, and that this God not only made me but loves me in Jesus Christ was news almost too good to be true. What a relief for a man or woman who flitted from one temple to another trying to appease all the powers and hold life together. So when you meet someone who is anxious about their future and who couples that with a devotion to gambling or some occult or esoteric system, recognize what you’ve met is an ancient pagan in modern garb. They are worshipping Fate and Fortune. Their beliefs and behavior are not in line with the truth about God; they are lost in a world they don’t understand. We are not fated; the world is not ruled by fate and the position of stars and lucky charms and magical rituals and knowing secret formulas. Such doctrines are demonic. To know a God who already knows my needs is the beginning of freedom and responsibility.

So if we are not to copy the pagans then and now, what are we to do? The answer comes in verse 33 as a comprehensive program for the organization of life, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (meaning whatever we need to do what God has called us to do) will be yours as well.” Put God in the front room, and supplies will march in the back door. Love the Lord God; follow Jesus with his people; listen for the voice of the Spirit. Whatever your station in life, let service and love be your goals. Persevere in hard times because help is on the way. Take God into your confidence in all matters great and small. Be alert to enemy opposition. Look above you for mentors, around you for partners, and below you for someone to lift up. Ask God to prune away the unnecessary and the distractions. Aim your life like an arrow at the center of the target. Then watch what begins to happen. The closer you approach your call and destiny in God, the more you will be aware of an invisible support system surrounding you and providing what is needed right on time. When you need guidance, it’s there. When you need a resource, it comes. When you need encouragement, God sends it. God always manages to get supplies to the front lines where the kingdom is pressing against and displacing the alien rule of the Evil One. This requires a military mind set and an awareness of the tactics and strategies of the other side, one of the chief of which is

to afflict us with all sorts of fears. Fear is a useful physiological response; fight-or-flight can save your life. Anxiety and worry can also become a crippling mental habit; it can be further agitated and worsened by a spirit of fear. A story from another pastor helps me keep things in perspective when I get lost in a fog of fear:

“According to the Bureau of Standards, a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of a hundred feet contains less than one glass of water. All that fog, if condensed into water, wouldn't quite fill a drinking glass.... Like fog our worries can thoroughly block our vision of the light of God's promises, but the fact is, they have little substance.”

Seeking first the kingdom of the Father that is in the Son and by the Spirit will make you a person of passion. You will stand out, not because of self-promotion but because you are following the only one worth your all. People notice. Some will try to douse your flame; others will come to the warmth and light of it. Dorothy Sayers, the great English writer, said it best:

“In the world it is called *Tolerance*, but in hell it is called *Despair*, the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”

Don't become that kind of person. Pursue the kingdom and the king. Let it be the burning center around which all other activities are organized. Larry Crabb put it this way, “Whenever we place a higher priority on solving our problems than on pursuing God, we are immoral.” Tough words, but I think Crabb is right. God is not a human convenience to be used. God is the end of all our seeking.

c) v.34 Worry Over Tomorrow Robs Living In The Present.

Someone has said worry is the interest we pay on bills not yet due. Worry is a "small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind til it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained."¹¹ Worry is toxic, pure poison, and so to counter it in yet a third block of teaching Jesus gave us wisdom on managing time in verse 34.

¹¹ Michael Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 21.

Matthew 6:25-34 15

Trust God that your life is a gift and that the one who gave it can keep it running: that's first in verses 25 through 30. Make God's business your prime business: that's second in verses 31 through 33. Once those two are in place, learn the wisdom of living one day at a time in partnership with God: that's the substance of verse 34. "Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." It is today's obediences that open up tomorrow's opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Planning is one thing, worry quite another. There are texts in Matthew that show Jesus praising forethought and planning.¹² What he forbade among his followers was excessive worry and the restless anxiety that robs today of joy and blinds us to what God's doing right now. Victor Hugo put it well, "Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones. And when you have finished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake."¹³

What if Jesus was telling the truth? And what if God is waiting for people to test and prove him in these matters?

¹² Matthew 25:14-30, 24:45-51, 25:1-13.

¹³ Michael Green, *Illustrations*, 21.
