

Do Not Be Anxious

Matthew 6:25-34

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Last week we saw that we can only have one treasure, one singly focused eye, and one master. It was a text which called us to choose who and what we are serving, and where our treasure is – heaven OR earth, and it excluded the possibility of mixture as idolatry. And it is precisely failure here, failure to place one's treasure, to store it up where it is beyond being assailed, or lost, or diminished, failure here, produces anxiety (downstream from some form of idolatry). And Jesus connects our text with that prior piece of teaching on our treasure, with the word “therefore, ” which opens our passage.

We shall look at this text, the gospel lesson, under five headings. The general principle (v.25), food (vv. 26-27), clothes (vv.28-30), the summary (vv. 31-32, 34), and the kingdom (v. 33). (repeat)

I. General Principal

First, then, the general principle. Therefore, since you must choose and serve only one master, and it must not be mammon, since your treasure can only be in one place, and it must be in heaven, therefore, I tell you:

Do not worry (be anxious) about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.

Like many things in the Sermon on the Mount, it strikes us as unrealistic. It's impractical. It feels that a kind of starry-eyed idealism (almost an escapism) has triumphed over a hard-boiled realism. And, as we've observed, we are quick to domesticate these texts, and to remove their rough edges. I mean: Does Jesus really expect us to not worry at all about our lives, our futures?

This is not, I suspect, the level-headed, common-sense advice your parents gave you. *You know, work hard in school, make sure you get good grades, get a good job with benefits, plan for retirement, save for a rainy day, have good insurance....*

All prudent advice to be sure (though not without its own spiritual pitfalls). The problem is that, for most of us, planning and preparation and hard work are

almost always accompanied by fretting, by anxiety. For many, laboring for a secure future is virtually synonymous with worrying/fretting. After all, a lot of the good ole fashioned advice that parents regularly dispense seems designed to abolish serenity. To create a certain unease, a certain anxiety....as a stimulus to work. Because, you know, we don't want to encourage apathy or indifference or laziness or irresponsibility.

And when this type of advice is successful, it often creates a focused and driven person, but frequently it also creates a person riddled with anxieties, with a fear of failure, and a sense of foreboding about the future. Often it's the same person, and successful people will often tell you that they are driven by a kind of inner paranoia. (Andy Grove, Intel: Only the Paranoid Survive, Lou Gerstner: War/food).

Now, I would bet not one in ten thousand Christian parents, who guide their sons/daughters about education and work, have ever sat down, and read them *this text* as a piece of life planning advice. (unless your parents were hippies)

Now, for the record, let me just say it: the text does not preclude planning, hard work and a reasonable regard for one's future. But in saying this, we often let ourselves off the hook too easily. The text absolutely demands – it is in the imperative mood – it is a command, it demands the excision (cutting out) of, not some, but ALL worry from our lives. In the midst of planning and saving and working – there is to be absolutely no worrying. Zero. The same amount of worry as we have treasure on earth. Namely, Zero. As Paul puts it in Philippians 4:6: Be anxious for nothing. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes, and the God who gave life, the more valuable thing, will give the lesser things.

Before we proceed, let's say a few words about what worry is. There are certain apprehensions and natural fears in life which are probably unavoidable. Like a job interview, a big test, a major surgery. But these are occasional things, and we have to trust the Lord, pray for courage, and face them.

But worry here is more pervasive and basic. It is a state of being which takes our capacity to hope and perverts it. Worry is the mangling of hope. It is a sickness of the soul, and not a sign of legitimate concern. Worriers always think their fretting is a sign of how much they care. It's not – it's a disease. It is to have not a single eye, but a divided eye, a divided soul. To worry is to be double, not single souled.

We worry because we have two masters, and two treasures – not one. The worried self is a fragmented self. Worry views the future with foreboding. A worried person craves a security they cannot have, and a control they have not been given. They worry about their LIFE – Jesus says --- their future daily bread.

Often this creates an unfocused, jittery, busyness. Worry shatters the Shalom, the peace of God which, having been given us in Christ, is to guard our hearts

and minds. Tranquility, repose, and steadiness flee. Worry uproots a person's well-being. And the general principle is clear: Anxiety/worry is forbidden.

II. Food

Our second point is food. Verse 26 contains a lesson from nature: Look at the birds of the air, they do not sow or reap or store away (gather) in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Worry ALSO does not read God's generosity in creation properly. It learns nothing from what is right in front of its eyes – thus Jesus' illustration: Look at, see, the birds. Luther has a marvelous comment here, he says:

He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding thing to us, that in the gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men. Whenever you listen to a nightingale, you are listening to an excellent preacher: it is as if he were saying: I prefer to be in the Lord's kitchen. He has made heaven and earth, and he himself is the cook and the host. Every day he feeds and nourishes innumerable little birds out of his hand.

Closer to our day, the philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, in a famous lecture, describing a time of anxiety (and some self-pity) in her life, and said:

We are anxiety-ridden animals, our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-pre-occupied, often falsifying veil, which partially conceals the world... But I am looking out my window... In an anxious and resentful state of mind, brooding on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment, everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity, has disappeared, and when I return to thinking of the other matter, it seems less important.

That's Iris Murdoch, being instructed by, hearing good news from, the birds of the air.

Of course the point is not that you shouldn't work – God doesn't just drop food into the beaks of birds – but like them, you shouldn't worry. They have no retirement accounts, no backup plans, and not unrelated, they also have no high cholesterol. Yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. (And ironically, in one instance, they, the ravens, fed Elijah.) And you, the text says, are of more value than they. Besides, verse 27 tells us, that anxiety is utterly fruitless and unproductive. Can anyone add a single hour to their life by worrying? If we could, some of us would live for ages.

But we cannot, and in fact, worry will usually subtract time from your life. It is divine sovereign goodness which numbers our days – their beginning and their end – not impotent human anxiety. So learn from the birds as they converse (from a poem entitled overheard in an orchard):

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.

III. Clothes

Our third point is clothes. Verse 28: And why do you worry about clothes? And this to a people who barely had more than the clothes on their backs, who have already been told, if someone takes your coat, give them your cloak as well. How much more relevant is this in the hyper fashion-conscious, full-closeted West?

Consider, Jesus says – again note the command to look and be wise – consider, see how the flowers/lilies of the field grow. They do not toil or spin. They work even less than birds, but the point is simply that God clothes them, and he does so with even more splendor than Solomon in all his glory. And the grass of the field doesn't even endure as long as our little ephemeral lives. It's here today and tomorrow it is thrown into the fire, a reference to the use of grasses and soil as cooking fuel in the ovens of the ancient world.

The flowers, which are eaten by cows, Luther says, are exalted to be our teachers. They never go out of style, whereas this year's fashions are next year's follies. As it was with the birds, so it is here. If the thing of lesser value is arrayed in splendor, will he not much more clothe you - O you of little faith?

Here we learn something crucial. To worry about clothing, provision for our bodies, is to be of little faith. Anxiety corrodes and distorts hope, because it is faithless. It refuses to believe that God has become our heavenly Father in Christ. It does not believe rightly in God's providential rule of the world. It does not believe that underneath us are the everlasting arms. The root of anxiety is unbelief, it is practical atheism. It thinks fragile economic realities are more basic than Jesus Christ.

IV. The Summary

This brings us to our fourth point, the summary. Verse 31: Therefore: do NOT be anxious. This is said three times in this passage. This worry is reflected in constant speech about what we are going to eat or drink or wear. The pagans

run after all these things. They run, they seek, they pursue them with vigor. In fact, this is about all pagans like to talk about – they can do it for days on end.

If human beings are nothing but a bio-physical bundle of bodily needs, then sure, worry all about this stuff – but it betrays a false view of the human person. And a false view of humanity always entails a false view of God. The heavenly Father, who, Jesus says, knows we need all these things. Think about this. If we have such a Father in Jesus Christ, then anxiety is not only wrong it is, in the end, an illusion. It's a fantasy world without our heavenly Father, without his kingdom, without being rooted, hidden with Christ in God, without treasure secure in heaven, where we are stranded, left to our own resources, to fill the gap between now and the future.

In v.34 Jesus reiterates the command. Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious about itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. The word for trouble is evil. Jesus knows there are plenty of things which, humanly speaking, can provoke worry. Every day has its quota of the stuff. Yet, he says here that it's nonsensical, it's just irrational, to worry. Tomorrow (or the day after) is not even promised to us. And if you worry about it, and its troubles do not materialize, then you've worried in vain. If you worry about it, and its troubles do materialize, then you will end up worrying twice. Worry doubles trouble.

George MacDonald said: no man ever sank under the burden of the day. It is when tomorrow's burden is added to the burden of today, that the weight is more than a man can bear. We love to borrow trouble from the future, when in fact, what we are promised is grace for TODAY, and bright HOPE for tomorrow.

V. The Kingdom

Finally, the kingdom. The Gentiles seek, they run after, all these things, but you are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We are not, indeed we cannot simply refrain from worrying. We must, instead, pursue the kingdom. For we will either be possessed by our anxieties, or we will be possessed by the kingdom. And we are seeking, ironically, the kingdom which has already come in Christ, and shall come in fullness. As always, we pursue that which we already have as gift.

The kingdom, then, is the supreme reality. The kingdom is, as we saw in the Lord's Prayer, the kingdom is the new creation, it is the realm of the Spirit. Thus, to seek it is to read the world aright, as our Father's world. And seeking the kingdom means seeking the righteousness of God. This is not a statement about justification. It is a call to seek the just reign of God our Father. It is a call to live the beatitudes. To hunger and thirst for righteousness, to grasp that persecution for righteousness' sake IS to already possess the kingdom which we are seeking.

It is essentially to seek what we ask for in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. It is to pursue the hallowing of God's name, the coming of his rule, and the obedience of his will, ALL three, on earth as they are in heaven.

The Kingdom of God does not consist, Paul tells us, in food or drink, but it is righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit. And seeking the kingdom displaces anxiety, because the promise is that all these things, food, drink, clothing, all these things will be given to us as well. Seeking the one, annihilates the other.

So, we have seen in the Sermon on the Mount, that there are two kinds of piety. That which seeks the applause of men or that which seeks the approval of our Father in secret. There are two kinds of treasure. Treasure on earth or treasure in heaven. There are two kinds of eyes: generous eyes or stingy, selfish eyes.

There are two and only two possible masters: God and mammon. So, here, there are two and only two types of pursuit: The pagan pursuit of all these things, or the pursuit of the kingdom of God and its justice. Our lives are enveloped by this God and this peaceable kingdom. They are not poised over some dark abyss. They are not suspended in doubt. They belong to the One who rules, and the One who rules, rules out anxiety as a phantom sickness. Cast your anxieties upon Him, for he cares for you. And that is where, for many of us, seeking his kingdom and its righteousness must begin. Amen.

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