

“Me and My Anxiety”—Matthew 6:25-34

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Take your Bible and meet me in Matthew 6 (page 811 in the pew Bibles). Last week we were looking again at the model prayer that Jesus taught His followers, which we all know as the “Lord’s Prayer.” That prayer ends with a petition for God to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (6:13). Today we will be considering one of the greatest temptations that we experience in this world—the temptation to worry. You will find what Jesus has to say on this matter at the end of chapter 6.

If you are new with us, you may wonder if we are skipping some stuff. Actually we are not. A few weeks ago I preached a sermon that dealt with what Jesus says on fasting in verses 16 to 18. Then another one of our pastors preached on verses 19 to 24, where Jesus instructs us to lay up treasures in heaven. So the only part of chapter 6 we have not covered in the last verses on the topic of worry. We will consider what Jesus has said there this Sunday and the next.

Take a look at verse 25 and following. Listen carefully as I read it to you. This is the Word of the Lord...

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”²⁶ 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?²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin,²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.³⁴ Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (Matthew 6:25-34)

We started reading in verse 25, but the section really stretches back at least to verse 19. In the larger context there are 3 major imperatives (i.e., commands) issued by Jesus. He says, first, in verse 20 that you are to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” The previous verse makes the same point, but put it negatively—“do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...” Then the second major command is “do not be anxious,” which He repeats in verses 25, 31, and 34. And, finally, He also commands us to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” in verse 33. Those are the three action steps of this section. Pursue heavenly gains, don’t worry, and seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness.

Is there a relationship between these three commands? Probably. It’s not really grammatical, but there is certainly a logical relationship between them. For example, one might say that the major command is the final one—seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness. That’s what our lives should be about. That should be our goal, life’s ultimate ambition. It’s our *first* priority. We were even taught to pray for God’s kingdom to come (6:10). Laying up treasure in heaven is one way that we go about seeking these things first. We are treasuring God more than we treasure this world and the things of this world. It just so happens that our anxieties are usually tied to these worldly things, so if we are to be freed to seek first these kingdom realities and pursue the right treasure, then we must be freed first from our worldly anxieties. Taking serious, then, what Jesus says about worry and applying His instruction will help us to keep these other commands more fully in this life. Thus Jesus wants us to be free from anxiety. Did you hear that? That’s

really good news! Jesus wants to help you in your struggle with worry.

So here's what I'd like for us to do. Today, we will consider the nature of our anxiety. We will probe into what it is and where it comes from. We will try to understand it theologically, not so much physiologically (though these two vantage points are not incompatible). Then next time we will take a look at the various reasons this text offers us on why we ought not to worry. Jesus offers several logical facts to help counteract our anxious tendencies. He shows us how worry is unreasonable, unnecessary, unrewarding, unfaithful, ungodly, and unwise.¹ I hope you will make it a point to be here next time, because I suspect most of us need to take to heart what Jesus has to say on these matters. So come next week.

Let's begin with the elephant in the room. Jesus says "don't worry" and you may be scratching your head thinking, "okay Jesus, but my anxiety doesn't seem very voluntary." No one wakes up in the morning and thinks, "today I want to be really stressed out. Yeah, that's it. Let's worry sun up to sundown. I can't wait!" Who does that? So it may seem odd to you that Jesus tells us not to be anxious. But the fact that He does, no less than three times, shows that there must be some volitional aspect to our anxiety, at least most of it. I don't deny that there may be some psychological and biological contributing factors that may render some more prone to anxiety. But generally speaking most our anxiety is more self-inflicted. And since the Lord instructs us to not be anxious, then there is a sinful component to our tendency to worry. Everyone does it. But that doesn't make it right from God's perspective.

As we pursue freedom from anxiety, it will help for us to understand it. So let's start with the basic question: what is anxiety? That's not as easy a question as you might expect. Anxiety is difficult to define. It's much easier, however, to describe. *Time* magazine, years ago, described anxiety as the prevailing quality of modern culture. Not much has changed since then. I once heard the experience of anxiety described as having the bass note line from the movie *Jaws* playing in the background. You're always looking around for a fin to break the surface. You're just sure something is about to happen, someone's about to get you.

Now that experience is not always a bad or sinful thing. We know that God created our bodies with autonomic nervous systems so that when there is some sudden danger that system is triggered by anxiety. Very quickly our bodies start pumping adrenaline and other chemicals to prepare us to react appropriately. This is the famous fight or flight reaction you heard about in school. It's our bodies' way of getting us ready for immediate and needed action.² This is God's design. It's good. We need that anxiety. It keeps us safe.

But that's not meant to be the norm of your life. So if you feel like *Jaws* is the soundtrack of your life, then there is a problem. That state takes a toll on you psychologically. It creates stress, which manifests in emotional and physical ways. You may have panic attacks. You may not be able to sleep at night. You lose your appetite. You develop ulcers. Your medical chart now notes your hypertension. You may even suffer a heart attack or stroke. Stress kills. It's not something to mess around with, yet it is as common as air. Everybody does it, myself included. Some even wear their stress almost like a badge of honor. They announce it like it proves that they're important. "Look at me, I'm so stressed because I'm so busy doing all this important stuff." But, deep down, under the vast majority of what we tend to stress about is something much more sinister, something sinful. Even if it's a more "respectable sin."³

You see, worry is concern fixated on the potential, not the actual. The vast majority of what we worry about never actually materializes. We stress about all the contingencies, when most, if not all, of them will only exist in our imagination. We know that from experience after experience, yet we keep worrying. Why? Because worry is about control. We want to control the outcome of situations. We want to control people's perceptions. We want to control people's actions. We want to control our life and future. We want to control it all. And when we fear that we have no control or we're losing control, we worry. That's

anxiety in a nutshell. It's the desire to control the uncontrollable. It's the illusion that we can control things.⁴

I love the way David Powlison describes the relationship between anxiety and the “treasure principle” that we have considered in previous sermons. He writes,

“Worry assumes the possibility of control— over the uncontrollable. The illusion of control lurks inside your anxiety. You'll see it in yourself, and in the people God gives you to help. Anxiety and control are two sides of one coin. We want to control something. Since we can't control it, we worry about it. Jesus' ...comment gives you one more handle on *why* you worry. A worrier is storing 'treasure' in the wrong place. If what you *most value* can be taken away or destroyed, then you set yourself up for anxiety. Money? health? a particular friendship? the dream of marriage? success in sports or business? how your children turn out? Even when you feel good, when everything's going your way, you're building your house on sand. Your treasure is vulnerable. And whenever what is 'precious' to you is threatened, you'll be gripped with fear. Guaranteed. Where do you store your treasure? In iffy things or certainties?”⁵

What he refers to as “the illusion of control” is really important. Let me give you an example. You go in for a routine medical exam. The doctor comes back and tells you that there was an abnormality in your recent test and he suspects you have some hereditary cancer. Suddenly your anxiety levels rise. Why? Because you feel vulnerable and out of control. Now the reality is that the cancer has been growing inside of you for months, maybe even years. But you didn't know it before, so you didn't worry about it. There was no difference, however, in the level of control you had on that cancer's development pre- or post-doctor's visit. What's different is that the threat exposed the illusion that your sense of control really was. You were never in control. You were always vulnerable. You're not in charge. God is.

So why do we feel anxious? Because we want the control that God alone has. We're envious of God. We hunger for His power to control the outcome of our lives. We want to determine what's good and right, or at least what's good and right for us. We want to control those things that He currently is controlling. That's really the summation of the tragedy that occurs in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible.

God gave us dominion over all of His creation and left us with one command. We couldn't even keep that one. Why? Because we didn't like being in charge of everything except God. That wasn't enough. We wanted to be in charge of everything. We wanted to be our own masters. That's where temptation seized the first humans. That's where it gets us too.⁶ As Timothy Keller writes, “The more we want power, the more we seek to control our lives, the more we resent the fact that God is actually in control of our lives, the more insecure we get.”⁷ That's the soil in which our anxiety grows. It's about control. It's about power. It's about our desire to be sovereign and our fear that we are not. That's why Martin Luther would say to his friend Philip Melanthon whenever he would fret and despair, “Let Philip cease to rule the world.” The advice is equally applicable to our anxious tendencies. Stop trying to rule the world. That's God's job, not yours. The more comfortable you get with God being God, the less grip worry will have in your life. On the other hand, when you're not comfortable with that reality, then you will either try to be your own god or you'll turn to other sources, other gods, that you think will provide you the control and power that you crave. Either way, that's idolatry at work.

Now is that notion in our text today? I think so. Let me show you. Jesus exposes...

The Idolatry of Anxiety

First of all, let's define our term. What do we mean by idolatry. Here's one definition that has been offered:

“Idolatry means to worship someone or something other than the true and living God. It is giving yourself to some person, goal, ideal, or object other than Jesus. It involves hitching your heart to some false savior and refuge; exalting your personal desires above the Lord; serving some master other than God.”⁸

Friends, I would contend that worry is usually an expression of idolatry of the heart. “Your worry is a sign that in some way you are trusting in yourself, that you are building your life on things or people other than Jesus.” Look again at verse 25. Jesus says, “*Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life...*” That first word—“therefore”—is very important. It shows us that there is a connection between these verses and the section before (6:19-24). So consider that section with me once more.

Jesus begins by saying, “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal*” (6:21-22). So then remember the lesson. The things tied to Christ and His kingdom don’t perish, but those things tied to this world do. Have you noticed which kind of treasure is the object of our worry? Usually it’s the earthly kind—your relationships, your job, your kids success, your looks, your reputation, your money, your stuff, your health, where you’ll be next year...you get the idea. When we get so focused on these things that we attach our heart to them, then we become obsessed with worrying about securing and sustaining those things. But those things weren’t meant to last forever. That’s earthly treasure. It fades and therefore it will fail you in time. So they give you plenty of fodder for worry.

Here’s the irony of it all though. You are trying to maintain control over all those things (or to use those things to gain control of your life), but in so doing those things begin to control you. You start obsessing over them. Living for them. You turn to them for security. They become idols. They are ultimate in your heart. Jesus sums up that reality in verse 21—“*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” You see, what you worry about helps you see where your treasure is and, by extension, where your heart is. So what do you worry about? What does that reveal about your treasure and your heart?

It’s not a coincidence that just a couple verses later, Jesus says “*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*” (6:24). There is something idolatrous in all of this. You are either serving God or serving something else. You’re either living for Him or living for something else. If it’s something else, then that something else is an idol. And what we worry about tends to reveal the idols we are tempted to live for and seek our security from—whether money, relationships, success, or whatever else.⁹

Do you have an idolatry problem? If you have a worry problem, odds are you do. In which case, you need to repent. You need to confess that sin to God and experience His grace and mercy. As Robert Jones, one of the best Christian counselors of our generation, writes,

“No one but the God of Scripture—the true and living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus—is powerful enough, good enough, and wise enough to provide for you and guide you. He is a good master, a faithful God, and a secure refuge, incomparably more trustworthy than the substitutes we seek. While our former master—sin—pays his slaves the wages of death, our new master—God—freely gives His slaves the gifts of holiness and eternal life (Rom. 6:22-23). Repent of your false masters, false gods, and false refuges, and renew your faith in God your Savior.”

May that be your first step in recovery from worry...

Before we close today, I want to mention one more aspect of worry. I'll introduce it today and we will explore it more next time. Not only does our worry tend to involve a subtle form of idolatry beneath the surface, but it also involves a failure to believe the character and promises of God. This connects us to the final imperative.

The Unbelief of Anxiety

Did you notice how Jesus addresses His audience in verse 30? He says, "*O you of little faith.*" He's talking to His followers here. He doesn't say that they possess no faith, just that their anxiety demonstrates a less than abundant faith. That's true for all of our sin, not just when we sin through anxiety. We will talk more about this next time, but I want you to know that all of the content in these verses is given to strengthen your trust in God. It's potent stuff. I can't wait to dive into it with you next week. For now, let me simply say this: when facing anxiety it is important for us to increase our focus on the things of God. This is why Jesus gives the imperative of verse 33—"*seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" We will explore that verse next time in greater detail. Today, just notice that the "remedy for worry is to seek the Lord, to believe His promises and orient your life around His priorities."¹⁰ That's the antidote. When we worry that we won't have what we truly need, it shows that we are not seeking first the kingdom and we are not believing the promise that God gives to those who are. God will provide all that is needed to do His will. Do you believe that? The extent that you do will be the extent that you are free from worry.

I'm hoping by the end of our time next Sunday, you all will believe that. I'm praying for freedom for us, when it comes to worry. But you don't have to wait until next week. Spend time this week meditating on verses 25 to 34. Let them sink in. And next week we will celebrate the providence and love of God they communicate.

The main objective today was to show the relationship between the three major imperatives of this context (and I believe we have) and to show the sinful nature of most of our struggles with anxiety. It is idolatrous. It's an expression of unbelief. And, therefore, it's sinful.

But don't let the fact that it's sinful push you away from Jesus. Remember, the Bible teaches us that Jesus came into the world to save sinners like you and me. He came to forgive us of our worrying and make possible a new way of life. He did that by dying for our sin. On the cross, He substituted Himself in our place, took upon Himself our sin, absorbed all the consequences of our sin, so that through faith in Him we could be forgiven and brought in relationship with God. Biblical faith involves trust. It's not just believing in Jesus and believing that He did these things. Even the demons believe that. Saving faith involves you turning away from your sin and trusting in Jesus alone to save you. It involves you realizing you can't save yourself by anything you do and acknowledging that Jesus alone can save you. If you would turn to Him with that kind of faith today, you would be forgiven of all your sin and make the first step toward recovery from worry.

"While God might not reverse the tough situations you worry about, He specializes in pardoning, cleansing, and helping the worrying person." Trust me I know. "Amid difficult circumstances, He wants to change you."¹¹ So I commend Christ to you today as your only hope. Hope for your salvation. Your hope for freedom from sin. Your hope for freedom from worry. Let's pray...

¹ These adjective were adopted from a sermon preached by Michael Andrus called “The Utter Foolishness of Worry,” preached on March 25, 2007.

² Timothy Keller, “Seeking the Kingdom,” a sermon preached on June 3, 1990, to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, NY.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

⁴ David Powlison, “Don’t Worry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Winter (2003), 58.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Keller, “Seeking the Kingdom.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert D. Jones, “Getting to the Heart of Worry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Spring (1999), 17:3, 22.

⁹ Ibid., 23. Stanley Gale writes, “Worry is an attempt to overthrow the only God who has creative and redemptive lordship over our lives....Instead of trusting God by submitting and yielding to His good pleasure, the worrier rebels and asserts himself in defense of autonomy, of independence from the God in whom he lives, moves, and has his being.” Stanley D. Gale, “Worry Unmasked,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 9:4, 1989, 18.

¹⁰ Jones, 23-24.

¹¹ Ibid., 21-22.