

Understanding Anxiety
Matthew 6:25-34
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel. After correcting the traditional teaching of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 5:21-48), and rebuking the practices of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 6:1-18), Jesus addressed money. Central to the self-service of the hypocrites was the desire for money rather than serving God (Matthew 6:19-24) and the anxiety for the things of this life (Matthew 6:25-34).

The preceding context of Matthew 6:25-34 is the principle that no one can serve two masters. This context is linked by the word “therefore” in Matthew 6:25. This exhortation to not be anxious flows directly from the teaching of Jesus about money in Matthew 6:19-24.

There is an inherent conflict when we have two masters with invariably competing interests. No one can serve God and money. We will end up loving one and hating the other. This love for money leads to the application of what money brings, namely security.

When we are secure, we are not anxious about the future. The commands of Matthew 6:25-34 address the requirement to not be anxious. Rather than being anxious about our life, we should seek for God’s righteousness and we will be secure. The implication then is that when we serve money rather than God we will become anxious because of the insecurity of money. Our wealth can become destroyed by outside influences (moths and rust in 6:19) or be stolen by thieves. It is inherently insecure.

The structure of Matthew 6:25-34

The command “do not worry” is found three times in Matthew 6:25-34. It is found first at the outset of this passage (6:25), and twice toward the conclusion of this passage (6:31 and 6:34). Each command, “do not worry,” is followed by a reason to not be anxious. Jesus does not merely command us to not be anxious, He gives us the thinking that undergirds the motivation for not being anxious. This is common with the commands of the New Testament. When we seek to serve others with God’s truth we must include a biblical explanation why we ought to follow God’s commands.

Do not be anxious because life is more than food and clothes (6:24-30)

The first time Jesus gives the command “*do not be anxious*” (6:24), He addresses our life. If we are anxious about ourselves, we will be serving ourselves rather than serving God. This statement parallels Paul’s command in Philippians 4:6, “*Be anxious for nothing.*” There must be nothing in our life that should cause us anxiety.

Jesus specifies two basic areas of life that can be a source of great anxiety, eating and drinking, and clothing. Eating and drinking summarize the “food” (6:25) that is essential for our human existence on earth. “What you will put on” means clothing (6:25, 28) and what we wear (6:31). These two areas of life constitute our basic needs. “*If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content*” (1 Timothy 6:8).

Life is more than any one thing and if life is more than the most essential matters of sustaining life, then the necessary conclusion is that any matter that is less essential to our existence is even less important. As Jesus explains the reason why we should not be anxious for our life, He focuses on food with an illustration in Matthew 6:26-27 and then he focuses on clothing in Matthew 6:28-30.

1) Life is more than food

The birds of the air do not reap or sow. This means that they do not prepare for the future. Yet without such preparation, God feeds them. Likewise they do not build barns to gather for the future. This not only speaks of preparation but speaks of storing an abundance in times of plenty. Without such planning, God feeds them. Obviously there are other verses that instruct us to plan and therefore these words are not an exhortation to not plan. This also does not speak to idleness. Birds are actually active in gathering food for themselves and we should be similarly industrious as we live our lives. Rather it speaks of the trustworthiness of God in caring for the birds of the air.

Jesus notes that the birds of the air are of no more value than we are. If God cares for the birds of the air, He will therefore care for us. This truth regarding God’s provision for the birds of the air includes even the birds that He deeded to be unclean, such as ravens (Leviticus 11:15; Deuteronomy 14:14). This then is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If what is of less importance is true, then even more true will be that which is of more importance.

Matthew 6:27 addresses the impotence of anxiety in solving the matters of life. The literal translation of Matthew 6:27 is reflected in the King James Version "*one cubit unto his stature?*" The original New American Standard Bible translated this "*a single cubit to his life's span,*" recognizing that few people are concerned with their stature (i.e. height). Later the NASB changed to a translation that captures the essence of Christ's meaning with "*a single hour to his life?*" (seen also in the ESV and the NIV). This is a figure of speech that refers to a span of time in terms of a measure of length. We do this when we are asked how far something is away and we reply, "about an hour."

Not only does anxiety not add even an hour to our life, it may actually shorten our life. The stress-filled anxious life creates certain negative physical effects, harming the quality and quantity of our life. Worry is not only ungodly, it is unhealthy. It is both sinful and foolish.

2) The body is more than clothing

Anxiety about clothing parallels anxiety about food. Clothing is also an essential element for human existence but worrying about clothing does not bring warmth, just as worrying about food does not solve hunger. The same truth is restated with the application to clothing—if God will care for our most basic needs that can bring us anxiety, then He can also care for us in ways that are less cause for anxiety than what threatens our life.

Like in His teaching about food, Jesus uses an illustration from nature to teach about the sinfulness of worry in regard to clothing. The lilies of the field are not lilies as we understand that genus of flower. Rather these are bright colorful wildflowers that grow in the open fields of the region of Galilee. One such type of flowers are anemones and also wild crocuses and scarlett poppies. All are perennials that bloom abundantly in the springtime and then lie dormant.

By saying these flowers do not toil or spin, Jesus is comparing the lack of preparation for the display of the flowers in comparison to the work of spinning thread that is required in garment making. The flowers bloom only because God's economy of nature has purposed for perennial flowers to bloom seasonally.

The book of 1 Kings describes Solomon's glory that Jesus referenced. Solomon's great wealth (1 Kings 4:20-34; 10:14-29) and his extravagant palace (1 Kings 7:1-51) cannot compare to the beauty of nature. This statement of Jesus gives evidence that the glorious display of nature exceeds the best of mankind's efforts to display his grandeur.

While wondrous riches can decorate palaces, these riches are passing away. *“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten”* (James 5:1-2). Just as Solomon’s glory was temporary, the grass of the field also dies and is thrown into the furnace. The riches that we think will secure our future are temporary and fleeting (Matthew 6:19) and testify to man’s inability to provide enough to eliminate the anxiety that comes with dependence upon riches.

This comparison of wildflowers to Solomon has another aspect. Solomon’s glory did not last but year after year God continues to array the flowers of the field. While *“the grass withers and the flower falls off”* (1 Peter 1:24), God’s design in nature provides for the continued re-appearance of His creation annually. In contrast, the end of Solomon’s glory was final. God not only arrays His creation more gloriously, it is also more lasting.

Furthermore, the people of Israel, lacking an abundance of wood, would use the grass of the field for fuel. This is the point of Jesus’ mention of the furnace. Thus the grass that God clothed in glory was provided for mankind to serve them in ways beyond aesthetics. The Lord faithfully cared for the people in detailed ways that are unappreciated by anxious people.

That God cares for us in small, crucial ways that provide warmth and an ability to cook should bring confidence that God will care for us in whatever leads us to be anxious. Therefore, anxiety only demonstrates the littleness of our faith when there is abundant evidence of God’s provision for us.

Do not be anxious because its a sign of unbelief (6:31-33)

Jesus’ rebuke of the littleness of faith that anxiety reveals is built upon by Jesus’ words of Matthew 6:31-33. His strong imperative “do not worry” is a call to faith in God. Worry ignores all the ways that God has faithfully supplied for our needs in the past. We have been fed, we have had enough to drink and we have been clothed. The trustworthiness of God is the foundation of Jesus’ command to not worry.

Worry is therefore sinful because it not only violates the explicit command of our Lord but because it reveals an underlying lack of faith. This lack of faith is the point of Matthew 6:32. Worry is characterized by the practice of the Gentiles who eagerly seek to accumulate more than enough to eat, drink or wear. To place our security in the uncertainty of riches is a pagan value system.

It is empirically evident that the Gentiles, or those who embrace idolatrous thinking in opposition to the God of Israel, pursue what makes their life secure. As one's wealth increases, the value of possessions becomes less about our security and more about our significance. *"Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions"* (Luke 12:15).

Essentially this issue regards our faith in what is most important in life. When we worry, we not only lack faith in God to provide for our needs, we also foolishly prioritize temporal things over eternal things. *"While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal"* (2 Corinthians 4:18). Therefore, the secret to anxiety is to place the Lord and His kingdom as our highest priority in life.

This priority of the kingdom is the point of Matthew 6:33. It is insufficient to simply no longer worry about what we will eat or what we will wear. The means by which to truly overcome the sin of anxiety is to replace our overriding concern with these material things with an overriding interest in God's kingdom and His righteousness.

To seek first God's kingdom is to pursue what our Lord revealed about God's kingdom. For example, we must pray for the coming of God's kingdom (Matthew 6:10). We should likewise pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), which will be fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom. This practice of God's will on earth is the product of the reign of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. This occurs in part as individuals submit themselves to the will of God but the complete honor that is due to our Lord through His will being done on earth awaits His second coming to establish the Kingdom of God.

Certainly a major way of seeking God's kingdom is found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, *"And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.""* These are our marching orders and to the degree in which we prioritize these final words of Jesus demonstrates the value we place upon seeking God's kingdom.

To seek first God's righteousness corresponds to seeking God's kingdom. We must prioritize His will by submitting ourselves to His revelation about how we should think and live. Holy living is the product of seeking first His righteousness.

The promise of Jesus is that when we "*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*" that "*all these things will be added to you.*" In context, these things are referring to that which Jesus taught His disciples not to worry about. The daily needs that we have for living will be providentially provided by God as we busy ourselves about God's kingdom and righteousness. Seeking first God's kingdom certainly does not preclude working for a living. "*Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve*" (Colossians 3:23-24).

An outstanding question remains in light of this promise by Jesus. Does this mean that all who have died from lack of food or clothing in history were not seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness? How do we reconcile the great suffering of believers in history with this promise of Jesus that our needs will be provided for?

The answer to this question involves the issue of the problem of evil. Why does God allow evil in the world? Also, it involves the question of why bad things happen to good people. The simple answer is that God's wisdom is higher than man's wisdom and God in His sovereignty has allowed evil to exist and also allows for very difficult circumstances to come to His children for His higher purposes. Included in these difficult circumstances are severe deprivation that some have suffered to the point of death.

As we look at the text, we can observe that our heavenly Father knows that we need food, drink and clothing (Matthew 6:31-32). Our heavenly Father knows far more about us than we even know about ourselves. We have a particular view of our circumstances and God's understanding of what our need is in the midst of our circumstances is much deeper than our understanding. Also, God is working out His perfectly wise plan for us in ways that also serve a greater purpose beyond ourselves. There are countless factors that make it impossible for us to know what our needs truly are and how God is serving us into eternity through our circumstances.

The end of the matter is faith. We must trust that God loves us and knows our needs. Since God is loving, omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipotent (all-powerful), we can have great confidence in the promise that all these things will be added to us (i.e. our true and most important needs). We will not know the exact outcomes in advance and

we will not know how God is working for our good (cf. Romans 8:28), but we can know that if we seek first His kingdom, He will deliver us faithfully to the conclusion of His perfect plan for our lives.

Do not be anxious because each day has enough trouble (6:34)

The final of the three negative commands “do not worry” concludes this section. In addition to having the proper perspective on our life (6:25-30) and our faith (6:31-33), we should have the proper perspective on time. Thus this final reason for why we should follow Jesus’ command to not worry is because “tomorrow will care for itself.”

The word “tomorrow” is a figure of speech known as a synecdoche, where a part is used to represent the whole. Tomorrow is used to represent all of the future days. This is further established by the reference to “each day” in the next sentence of this verse.

Beyond anxiety over the material things of this world that our loving and faithful Lord is able to abundantly supply, we are faced with anxiety over the future that our loving and faithful Lord is able to fully control. We cannot even know, much less control, the future and therefore our anxiety may be for things that may never occur. *“Do not boast about tomorrow, For you do not know what a day may bring forth”* (Proverbs 27:1).

Even if our concerns did become realized, we cannot be sure our plans would solve these problems. In the end, we are dependent upon God who actually knows the future, knows what we need (cf. Matthew 6:32), and is fully able to solve any problem with the ultimate wisdom. Man is able to plan but any plan for the future cannot be counted upon with full confidence.

This is the very point of the parallel passage in James 4:13-17: *“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”*

The idea of a plan is not what is condemned as evil but rather the boasting in the plan. Unless the Lord allows us to live we will not be able to experience anything in this life. If our very existence is dependent on the Lord’s will, then smaller affairs of everyday life also hang in the balance.

The righteous way to plan without succumbing to anxiety is to live in the present and to live for eternity. Our choices in the present affect the future but we can trust the Lord to help us in our weakness of knowing the future and this wisest course to take. By seeking first His kingdom we live for eternity in the present.

The statement "each day has enough trouble of its own" acknowledges the difficulties that we face in the present. When we become concerned about the future that we cannot know or control, we become distracted from the present that we are responsible for as stewards of our life before God. *"Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is"* (Ephesians 5:15-17).

By understanding God's revelation in the Scripture we can avoid foolishness in the present and make the most of our time, trusting God for the future as we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. As we grow in our understanding the Lord will help us to perceive wisdom if we ask Him in faith. *"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting"* (James 1:5-6a). Wisdom will move us to dwell in the present and in eternity rather than in the future that only the Lord knows.

Conclusion

Anxiety is sinful, rooted in a lack of faith in God. The only way to overcome the sin of worry is through faith in God. *"Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him"* (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus does not only tell His disciples "do not worry" (6:25, 31, 34) but also "you of little faith" (6:30).

In the exercise of true faith we must seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (6:33). The promised result of this faith is that the Lord will provide for our needs. When our thoughts and actions are overwhelmed by fear for the future we will never enjoy the blessing of trusting God and delighting ourselves in His provision.

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).