

Learning to Live Without Worry

September 25, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

There is a video on Youtube that you can find if you search "Bob Newhart Stop It." It's a classic video that runs about 6 and a half minutes long. It's about a woman who comes in to Bob Newhart's office for some psychiatric advice. She explains to Bob that one of her fears is being locked in a box. Bob diagnoses it as claustrophobia and tells her all she needs to know to solve her problem is in two words. She prepares to write it on a pad of paper, listening carefully, waiting for Bob's words of wise counsel. Bob shouts at her the two words: "Stop It!" The woman is startled and asks Bob what he means. He tells her it's not difficult to understand. It's only two words. And he shouts at her again: "Stop it!" She wants to get her money's worth so she asks his advice on a number of other problems she is having. Each time Bob says, "Stop it!" The woman tells Bob she doesn't like his advice at all. Every time she shares one of her problems with him, he just shouts, "Stop it." Bob assures her that he will then share ten words with her that should clear it all up. She readies her pen and paper for Bob's counsel. He shouts, "Stop it or I will lock you in a box!" At any rate, it's dark humor but pretty funny to watch.

Today we talk about something that everyone does: worry! Can you guess what my counsel is for dealing with worry? You guessed it. "Stop it!"

Seriously, if there is one thing that you do that accomplishes absolutely nothing, worrying about something is it. Actually, it's worse than doing nothing. It actually makes things worse, because if you worry enough, you will get ulcers. Yep, another thing to worry about!

Why then do we worry? Our society nurtures it. The best way to sell more newspapers and magazines or to increase the ratings of the evening news is to give you something to worry about. "Living in this world just got worse—story at 11:00." Media executives, advertisers, and politicians [and even some pastors] use fear to motivate and manipulate people.

Also, we carry around a false narrative that if we worry about something, we can prevent the worst from happening. We convince ourselves that if we worry more, then we can prevent even more harm from happening in the future. Then, when it happens that something bad does happen, we convince ourselves that even though worrying about it didn't change anything, maybe next time we worry something bad will be prevented from happening. It sounds like a very silly narrative yet so many people are captivated by it.

Before we go any farther, I want to be clear that there is a difference between being cautious and careful and being worrisome.

We should be concerned about many things: locking doors, managing our money wisely and driving carefully on slippery roads. This is not the same as worry. Worry is what we do after we have planned, prepared and acted properly. When we continue to stew about something, we have crossed into the world of worry.¹

Jesus had just preached on the dangers of accumulating material goods and wealth, and then addresses the subject of worry in regards to how God provides.

Jesus says we are not to worry about food and clothing. These two things are natural human concerns. I think Jesus uses these because they are primary human life needs. What was Jesus trying to get us to see when he asked, "Are you not of more value than they?" Many people read Jesus' teaching as if he is saying, "You don't need to worry about having food or clothing—just have faith. God will provide them for you," the implication being that with simple faith God will drop food into our mouth and

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

fill our closet with expensive clothes. But the reality is that many faith-ful men, women and children starve each day. Jesus is not saying that people who are indeed poor and hungry—the kind of people who were listening to this sermon—lack faith and need to trust God more. Telling impoverished people they need to have more faith would be cruel and utterly wrong. So what is Jesus saying? In previous sections Jesus prefaced his teaching with, “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you,” indicating that his teaching is opposed to the dominant narratives of his culture. Though he doesn’t say this here, his teaching once again turns a common teaching upside down. The rabbis often contrasted the carefree life of animals with the constant burden placed on humans to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. Jesus uses the examples of the birds to show that while they neither sow nor reap they are provided for. The point: Don’t worry.²

When Jesus mentions the flowers, he is teaching:

“If God takes such great pains to make a little, insignificant flower beautiful, then how much more will he take care of the people he made in his own image.” We may be tempted to think that Jesus is telling us to trust God to provide our needs without our help. Birds, as we know, are not lazy creatures. They actually work very hard. They do not sit in their nests and wait for God to bring them seeds and berries. They actively seek their sustenance. But they do this without worrying. Jesus’ point is clear: you are worth far more than a bird. In Jesus’ day several birds could be purchased for a handful of change. But we could never put a value on a person. That is Jesus’ point. Earlier in the Sermon, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” If we turn to God and ask him for our daily provisions, we can trust that he will do so. Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater: if the birds, who are not so valuable and neither sow nor reap, are provided for, how much more will my Father provide for you, his precious and priceless ones, who work hard for what you have? Jesus is asking us a profound question: if God provides for the smallest and most insignificant creatures, don’t you think he can provide for you, his most precious and important creatures? It’s a logical question that helps us move away from worry and into trust. Worry keeps me focused on my own limited resources. Trust keeps my attention on God’s abundant resources. This is why worry cannot exist in the kingdom of God. Worry happens when I am on the throne of my life, when I live in the kingdom of me. But we trust when God is on the throne of our lives and we live in his kingdom. That is why the solution to worrying is to seek first the kingdom.³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

What does it mean to seek the kingdom of God first? It means making the reality and the principles of God's kingdom our first and primary concern. It doesn't mean we shouldn't work hard. It doesn't mean we shouldn't care about anything or be responsible stewards of our lives and possessions.

We continually look to God and what he is doing in the midst of ordinary life. Seeking the kingdom first means facing our trials and troubles not with anxiety but with trust that God can and will work in them.

There are many things, good things, which will compete for our allegiance. For example: Should we care for the poor? Yes, but first we must seek the kingdom. Should we pray? Yes, but first we must seek the kingdom. Should we fight injustice? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom. Should we walk in the Spirit? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom. Should we go to church, read our Bibles and witness? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom of God.

Sometimes we focus all of our attention on a cause, a discipline or even a commandment of God, which are all essential aspects of being Jesus' apprentices. But the most important thing is to seek first the kingdom of God. Then everything falls into its proper place. I pray, care for the poor, fight injustice and attend church not because my concern is prayer, poverty, justice or worship, but because my primary concern is what God is doing. When I am concerned about God and his kingdom, I will naturally do these things as they are needed. The moment I put any of them ahead of the kingdom of God, they become idols, though they are good things.

We can abide by the counsel of Paul the Apostle who wrote: "Do not worry about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7-7). Instead of worrying, pray. If you know how to worry, you already know how to pray. Instead of worrying, "Oh Lord, what am I going to do now?" Ask, "Oh Lord, what are You doing now?" The Lord will provide.