

“Why Do You Worry?”

Introduction: Our children are going to act out our text for today which comes from that great body of teaching by Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount in which he calls us to live as salt and light in the world, both enjoying, and revealing, God’s goodness and beauty. As we said last week, we’re in that section of the Sermon where Jesus is identifying various ways in which we can lose our “saltiness” or have our light become hidden. Last week we considered how the pursuit of wealth can cause us to lose our way and today we’ll consider how the weight of worry can cause us to wander away from the life that is truly life. We begin by hearing about a man whose family was having trouble dividing up their inheritance. He wanted Jesus to help, and Jesus was willing, though in a much broader way than the man had imagined. Jesus actually used a section of his Sermon to address this man’s worry. [READ]

For several years a woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night because she worried about a burglar breaking into her home. One night her husband did hear a noise downstairs in their kitchen and, upon investigating, found a real live burglar prowling around. “Good evening,” said the husband. “I am so pleased that you are here. Come upstairs and meet my wife for she has been waiting nearly ten years to meet you!”

Do you know worry? You wake up at 4 a.m. and your mind starts to worry about all that lies before you and you never get back to sleep. Or you find yourself worried about how your children are going to grow up in this crazy world, or what kind of care your aging parent are going to need. Or you worry about whether or not you will still have a job next month, or if your 401K will provide enough for you to retire. Or you worry about the impact of climate change, or a new offensive in the war in Ukraine.

In the midst of any of these worries you might hear Jesus asking, “Why do you worry?” and you wonder, “really, Jesus? What world are you living in?!” Jesus might respond, “This is my Father’s world, and my Father knows what you need.” What would it look like to truly believe this? What would it look like to live without worry? How might you go about doing that?

I. Worry vs. Concern

A. Let’s notice from the outset than not all worry is bad. Jesus is not wanting us to be lazy or irresponsible. The word Jesus uses for worry is the same word Paul uses, in two different ways, in his letter to the church in Philippi:

Do not be anxious [worry] about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present you requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [4:6-7]

This comes just a bit after Paul has informed the congregation that he would be sending a mentored ministry student their way, a fellow named Timothy. Of Timothy Paul writes: “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern [worry] for your welfare” (Phil. 2:20). Depending on the context, and the state of our heart, worry might not be a negative. We should be concerned about wearing a seat belt, about eating healthy food, and about caring for our neighbor. So, when does genuine concern turn into worry? An writer named James Bryan Smith explains it this way: “Worry arises after we have prayed, planned, and prepared, yet continue to stew about something.” Why do we do this? Why do we worry?

II. Why do we worry?

A. I think Jesus hits at the heart of our worry when he reminds us: “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” The implication here is that worry is linked to control and the belief that if we just worry enough we can either accomplish good things or at least prevent bad things from happening. Lying behind this implication is that God can’t really be trusted to act on our behalf, especially in the way we’d like him to, so we try to take over, by worry. To which Jesus might say, “So, how’s that been workin’ out for ya?!” Or, as someone else has observed: Worry is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do but doesn’t get you anywhere good.

B. Where, then, does worry take us? Jesus highlights two troubling places. One, worry takes us away from the life God wants us to experience. In the parable of the Sower, remember that the seed of God’s word that fell among thorns failed to mature because the worries of life prevented it from growing (Lk. 8:14). Worry, Jesus warns, can block God’s word from changing our heart. Two, worry can cause our priorities to become confused. Remember Jesus at the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha? Martha became so distracted by the preparations she thought she had to make for Jesus that she got lost worrying in the kitchen taking herself away from what Jesus had come to say (Lk. 10:38-42).

C. One of the helpful truths to keep in mind is that much of what we worry about actually never comes to pass. As you are probably aware, Wednesday is “Amazon delivery day.” It’s the day Amazon encourages you to choose to have all that you’ve ordered shipped and so keep shipping and other costs to a minimum. Well, in that spirit, I once heard of a business executive who chose to do all of his worrying on Wednesdays. When anything happened during the week that gave him anxiety and annoyed his ulcer, he would write it down, put it in a “worry box,” and forget about it until the next Wednesday. What he often discovered when he opened the box each Wednesday is that most of the things that had disturbed him were already settled. Worrying about them would have been a total waste of time!

III. How might we not worry?

A. Center our hearts in the fact that this is our Father’s world, and trust that if he keeps his eye on the ravens, the birds, and the wildflowers, he will certainly not take his eye off of us. Or, as Paul encourages his readers in his letter to the Christians in Rome, “God who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Ro. 8:32). The Father knows what we need.

B. Give thanks for what the Father has done. Thanksgiving, as we have mentioned, is a critical and extremely helpful spiritual exercise as it opens our hearts to the presence of God, and helps us to see where God has been at work. It was part of the route Paul directed the Philippian congregation to travel in the face of their anxiety and worry. It helps put things in perspective.

C. Get involved in what God is doing. That was the problem with the character known as the Rich Fool in the parable our children sketched out for us. He was so busy running after the things of the pagan world that he neglected the kingdom of God, refusing to acknowledge or give thanks for the abundance God had brought about in his life, and having no desire to use his harvest to come alongside and help others. Instead, his focus was entirely on himself, and worry ended up consuming him. May we set our hearts on the love of God for us, trusting him to meet our needs whatever our lot might be (#431).