

THE SIN OF WORRYING

MATTHEW 6:25-30

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MANY PEOPLE—EVEN PEOPLE WHO PROFESS TO BE Christians—never develop a deep and meaningful relationship with God, because they don't take the time and energy needed to talk with God. Without a meaningful devotional life, there can be no meaningful relationship with God. A church full of people who spend little time and energy praying to God is not a healthy church regardless of how many fellowship gatherings and evangelistic projects and worship meetings and community service projects and Bible studies the church has.

Informal inquiries that I have made among church goes convinces me that relatively few people are serious about their devotional lives, and relatively few people attend corporate prayer meetings. But, this should not surprise us, because most of Satan's energy is used to discourage God's people from talking to God on a regular basis. I am sure it makes the enemy happy to see a group of people who profess to be Christians rarely spending time talking to God and yet rejoicing over the fact that they have large numbers of people attending a large number of activities. It makes the devil happy to know that we are using wrong standards to measure our spiritual health.

Satan's goal is to destroy our relationships with God, and he knows the best way to do that is to destroy our devotional lives. If I want to destroy a certain undesirable plant in my yard, I will dig it up by the root. Without a root, there is no way the plant will be able to grow. Satan will first try to destroy our relationships with God by destroying the devotional life, which is the very **root** of those relationships.

And, if the devil fails at destroying the very thing that causes our relationships with God to grow, then he will use an indirect approach at attacking our relationships with God. When I want to guarantee the destruction of a dandelion growing in my yard, I will pull it up by the root. But, sometimes I am unable to get at the root, so I attack the part that grows above ground. Even though the dandelion can grow back, at least I have temporarily done something to slow down the growth.

Satan's strategy is the same. If he cannot destroy the private part of our relationship with God directly, he will destroy the part that is exposed to the world. The devil will use the world to distort our value system. He will convince us to store up earthly treasures for ourselves. When things like physical health and wealth and education and living a long life and living a life full of fun and happiness become more valuable to us than knowing God and helping other people to know God, then we are storing up for ourselves treasures on this earth. And, as our value system changes, so does our conversation with God. How often do we ask God to fill us with knowledge of Himself and empower us with the strength to help others know Him. What do we pray for? Our conversations with God reflect our value system.

IN THE SIXTH CHAPTER OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, WE have been following a certain progression of thought. Jesus first gives His disciples clear warning about the devotional life, because He knows the devotional life is foundational to the health of our relationship with Him. Then, after warning us to keep the devotional life private and pure,

Jesus goes on to warn of the dangers of storing up for ourselves temporary treasures that cannot satisfy. And, in today's scripture reading, we find yet another warning. Here, Jesus is not so concerned about our laying up treasures upon earth, as with our worrying about them or being anxious concerning them. And, of course, these two things are different. There are many people who are not guilty of laying up treasures upon earth, but who nevertheless are guilty of being anxious about these things to the point that they are constantly thinking about them.

Long ago I decided not to store up for myself treasures upon this earth. I determined that I would be willing never to own a home or even a car or have extra money set aside for non-essentials. If God wanted me to do without these and other things in order to concentrate on building His kingdom, I determined that I would be willing to do without them.

But, when I made that decision I was young and full of energy and had no children. I did not worry about what I would do after I turned seventy years old, because that seemed like an eternity from the present. Now, things have changed. I am not that young anymore, and I tire more easily than I used to. My wife and I make more visits to the doctor than we used to and we are experiencing the same physical challenges that other people our age face. And, we now have children that we are responsible to support. When our last child completes her education, we will be close to seventy years of age. Retirement no longer seems that far off. Those who manage my retirement funds tell me that I will be able to receive a two or three hundred dollars a month after I reach the age of seventy, that is if I continue to contribute to those funds at the present rate I am now contributing. And that, obviously, will not even be enough to pay the rent.

So, today, I find myself much more vulnerable to the temptation of worry than when Janiene and I were married twenty-eight years ago. Before I even begin to share what our scripture lesson has to say about worrying, I want to be honest with you and admit that I have worried more in the past couple of years about how I am to survive the future than I ever have in the past.

Now, with that admission made, let me tell you what I have learned from our scripture lesson about the sin of worrying.

THE FIRST LESSON I AM LEARNING IS THAT MY ENEMY, THE devil, never gives up in his efforts to destroy my relationship with God. If he cannot stop me from talking with God, then he will try to convince me to place too much value on things that have no value. And, if he cannot do that, then he is going to tempt me to worry about my ability to survive without the earthly treasures that other people are using as a security for the future.

You see, regardless of which level at which I am being attacked, Satan's goal is the same. He is out to destroy or weaken my relationship with God. If he cannot destroy it, he will weaken it so that I will not be as effective in the work of building God's kingdom. The temptations and attacks from the enemy do not decrease with age. This is one lesson I am learning.

The second and most important lesson I am learning from this passage of scripture has to do with the way I view God. I am learning that the source of all my worry is an improper viewpoint of who God is and how He relates to me. Or, to put it in another way, Satan causes me to worry by putting into my mind thoughts about God that are incorrect.

I believe there is one major point in today's scripture lesson that our Lord wants us to consider. In effect, Jesus is saying, "Take this life of yours about which you are tending to worry and become anxious. How did you get it? Where did it come from?" The answer is so simple and profound and powerful, but we are so prone to forget it.

The life we have is a gift from God. It is He who has decided to give us this life. We had nothing to do with that decision. Man does not create life. Man does not give being to himself. There is not a single person here who has decided to come into this world. The fact that we are alive at this moment is because God has willed it and decided it. He has given us the gift of life for a designated period of time and for a designated purpose.

The logical conclusion is simple. **God will make sure that every life He creates is sustained and able to continue to the very day He has ordained that we should die.** God never leaves unfinished any work He has begun. For Him to do so would be for Him to deny Himself. The life God gives us and the bodies in which we live it were created with a plan and a purpose. And, whatever God starts and whatever He has purposed, He will most certainly fulfill.

The main point of today's scripture lesson is not to explain how God is going to fulfill the purpose for which He has created us. There is a lot of deep mystery involved in the way God works out His purpose and ultimately brings glory to Himself. Today's scripture lesson is not going to teach us how God's purpose is fulfilled in the life of a person who dies before he or she reaches the age of one. Those of us who have lost babies before the age of one may never understand why, and this passage of scripture is not going to help us understand why.

Our scripture lesson is simply stating that life on this side of heaven or hell is going to be kept going until the day it is ordained to stop, and there is absolutely nothing we can do to prolong it.

JESUS USED TWO ILLUSTRATIONS TO DRIVE THIS POINT home. The **first** is the illustration of the birds. In MATTHEW 6:26-27, Jesus said, "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? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

Now, there is a huge difference between the way the life of a bird is sustained and the way the life of a person is sustained. In the case of birds, everything they need for the sustenance of life is provided for them free of labor. They may have to labor to collect it, but they don't labor to produce it. They do not have to sow or reap or store things away in barns. God provides everything that birds need to survive. In the case of man, it is entirely different. In GENESIS 3:19, we see God giving this command to man after the Fall: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." For man, the process of sowing and reaping and storing in barns is something that God has determined necessary for survival. Those who interpret this passage of scripture to mean that we are to sit around expecting our food to be

handed to us without working for it are mistaken. Man has to work for his food. He is commanded by God to do so.

And, there is another difference between the life of a bird and the life of a man brought out in this illustration. It is a bit more subtle and difficult to see at first glance, and yet it is an important difference. In the last half of verse 26, we read these words concerning the birds, "your heavenly Father feeds them." Jesus did not say, "Their heavenly Father feeds them." He said, "Look at the birds, and notice how your heavenly Father feeds them."

This is a very interesting statement. We know that God is the Maker and the Creator and the Sustainer of everything in the world. Everything in the world, including birds, is related to God in this way. But, the man who has been saved by God's grace has a special relationship with God. It is a father/child relationship.

And so, in this illustration, we discover two differences between men and birds. One difference is the method by which life is sustained. For birds the method is to gather what has already been provided. For man it is to work by the sweat of his brow to get what is needed for the sustenance of life. The other difference is the way birds and men relate to God. Birds relate to God in a general sort of way that all creation relates to their Creator. But, man has the potential of relating to God in a very special way. It is the relationship of a child to a father.

"Now," Jesus says, "Birds are less valuable than people." God has not given birds the ability to sow or reap or store. Nor has he given birds the ability to enter into a father/child relationship with their Creator. Nevertheless, their life is sustained until the day God has ordained them to die. If the life of that which is of less value is sustained, then how much more will the life of greater value be sustained?

Our family has a pet cat named "Du Du" that we consider a part of our family. I like the cat, and I feel a sense of responsibility to do what is necessary to keep him alive. But, it doesn't make sense that I would neglect the basic survival needs of my own children while, at the same time, do what is necessary to keep the cat alive. It doesn't make sense, because I value my children more than I value the cat.

If this is true of an earthly father, how much more is it true of our heavenly Father? The logic is so simple, but we often miss it. And, because we miss it, we worry.

Jesus ends the first illustration with these words, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" The answer to the question is obvious. No amount of worrying and fussing can extend our life span.

What do we worry and fuss about? We worry and fuss about insurance and money that we somehow think will guarantee us the best doctor and the best hospital when the day finally comes when our life is threatened by illness or accident. Somehow we think these things will guarantee that our life span will be increased. But, this is foolish thinking. God determines the day of our death. We think medical knowledge and skill can extend life, but when the day God has chosen arrives, no amount of medical skill and knowledge can prevent death. Our time is in the hands of God.

This is not to say that we should avoid buying health insurance, nor is it to say that we should not take advantage of and use all the medical skill and knowledge available to

us. Just as we must do everything necessary to sow and reap and store in order to survive, so we should do everything else necessary to care for the life God has given to us. That includes doing our best to provide for ourselves proper medical care when we are sick, and it also includes doing our best to eat properly and get enough sleep and exercise.

IT IS WRONG TO INTERPRET THESE WORDS IN A WAY THAT will cause people to neglect their earthly responsibilities. The reason our Lord spoke these words is because He knows that, as we work to sow and reap and store and do everything else we are supposed to do, we will be tempted to think that we can take control of our lives and actually determine how long we will live. He knows how easy it is for us to conclude that, if we have a lot of money in the bank, we can somehow guarantee that we will live longer. He knows how easy it is for us to worry that we will not be able to afford the treatment needed to extend our lives. So our Lord tells us not to worry about this. There are certain things we can do with money, but extending the time allotted for us on this earth is not one of them. When it comes to determining the number of days in a life, the millionaire has no advantage over the poorest of the poor.

Every internal need for survival, such as food and drink and proper medical care, will be provided for us by our heavenly Father until the time we are appointed to die. And, no amount of worry or money or health insurance is going to change that day, so there is no need to worry about it.

Now we turn to the second illustration and we find that what is true with internal needs for survival is also true with external needs for survival such as clothing and shelter.

The **second illustration** has to do with flowers. In MATTHEW 6:28-30 Jesus is quoted as saying, "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 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, O you of little faith?"

Just like the first illustration, we have a comparison between something of lesser value and something of greater value. The flowers and grass of the field are compared with people. The difference between the two is clear. The flowers and

grass of the field are transient and passing. In ancient times, they used to cut the grass and use it as fuel. It was the old way of baking bread. You first of all cut the grass and dried it, and then put it in the oven and set it on fire. It generated a lot of heat. You then raked out the ashes and put in the bread that was ready for baking. That was a common practice when Jesus walked this earth.

So, just like the first illustration, Jesus brings to our attention a basic difference between people and another part of creation. People are created with spirits that last forever. Even after we die, our spirits will go on living with new bodies. ECCLESIASTES 3:11 says that God has placed eternity in the hearts of men. Such is not the case with flowers and grass.

With this contrast in mind, Jesus tells us to consider how God provides for the flowers of the field in a magnificent way. The story about Solomon was familiar to his listeners. On a human level there was nothing to compare with the splendor of Solomon's wardrobe. But, there is an essential quality in the form and design and texture and color of flowers that no human clothing can imitate. If God provides for the flowers of the field (which are much less valuable than people), how much more will he provide for the outward things we need to survive like clothing and shelter?

Both the illustration of the birds and the illustration of the flowers, like all illustrations, are intended to make it easier for us to understand truth. And, in this case, the truth we need to understand is that we don't have to be anxious about our survival. It is not something we have to worry about.

This truth does not guarantee that I will always have enough money to buy the best kind of insurance or to rent a house large enough for each of my children to have their own bedroom or even to live in Parsippany, NJ. This truth does not guarantee that I will ever have the same amount of earthly treasures that others around me have. What this truth guarantees is that I will always have what I need to survive in order to fulfill the plan and purpose God has for my life until my race is ended. And, it is upon that plan and purpose that I must focus my attention.

I thank God for this passage of scripture that has come into my life at this particular time. It has been an encouragement to me, and I hope for you as well.