

HOW TO INCREASE FAITH

MATTHEW 6:31-34

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RECENTLY, ON SUNDAY MORNINGS, I HAVE BEEN considering together with you the topic of worrying. I believe this little paragraph recorded in MATTHEW 6:25-34 is the best analysis on the problem of worry that exists. No one is more qualified than Jesus Himself to explain this problem that each one of us experiences or will experience at some point in our lives. And that's because no one understands a human being like Jesus.

Two weeks ago, we noticed how Jesus used the phrase "little faith" to identify the basic cause of worry. And, we then tried to understand what Jesus meant by the phrase, "little faith."

I have to admit that spending a sermon to explain the meaning of "little faith" is a somewhat negative approach to the topic of worrying. The emphasis is totally on the cause of the problem and not on the solution. Therefore, today I will try to balance out what I said last time. I will try to follow the logic of our Lord in MATTHEW 6 and emphasize how we can increase our faith so that we won't worry about things such as food and shelter and clothing.

Immediately after Jesus said, "O you of little faith," He followed with a very important conjunction. In the King James Version the conjunction is "therefore." In the New International Version it is "so." Following the conjunction we find several logical arguments that teach us how to increase our faith. When the negative statement and the positive arguments are taken together, the logic sounds something like this: "The basic reason why Christians worry is their lack of faith. Therefore, the solution to the problem is for Christians to increase their faith so they will not worry."

Now, of course, we will not find here Jesus making the statement that one must increase his faith in order to stop worrying. We will not find those exact words. But, we will find several arguments. And, if we follow the arguments and grasp and understand the arguments, this will inevitably lead us to a greater faith. Now let's take a look at these arguments one at a time.

The *first argument* is found in verse 32. Starting in verse 31 we read, "So don't worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things..."

The words of the first argument remind us once again that the Sermon on the Mount is a teaching for Christians. It is not a teaching for everyone. Here Jesus, in essence, is saying that one way for Christians to increase their faith so they will not worry is for them

to be different from the pagans. The word "pagan" refers to anyone who does not have special revelation from God and, therefore, lacks special knowledge of God. That is the basic difference we find in the Old Testament between a pagan and a Children of Israel. In the New Testament, a pagan is someone who knows nothing about the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore does not understand God's way of salvation. It is impossible for the pagan to really comprehend the nature of eternal life. The pagan uses worldly standards to measure the value of life. In order to understand this first argument, we need to understand what Jesus means when he uses the word "pagan." We need to understand how a pagan thinks.

The late Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, when describing the pagan's point of view, wrote that pagans generally view the things that happen to us in one of two main ways. One way is to believe that everything in this life is accidental. Nothing really has purpose. Things happen without rhyme or reason and you never know what is going to happen next.

The other view is just the opposite. It is called fatalism. It teaches us that what is to be will be. It does not matter what you do or say, it is going to happen. The future is fixed. Therefore it is useless to strive or make any effort to change it. You can only hope that your fate will be good and that you can pass through this world without too much pain.

Now one might conclude that a person who believes everything that happens in life is accidental would not be worried about anything. And, one might also conclude that a person who thinks that everything is already predetermined would also not be worried about anything. But, let me assure you that the opposite is true. The less control a certain person believes he has over his circumstances, the more that person will worry about what is going to happen next and do everything in his power to make sure that what happens next will be good.

And, the standards pagans use to measure what is good have nothing to do with God. They are standards such as health and wealth and long life and education and emotional pleasure. These are the things that the pagan will seek and run after with all of his strength. A pagan wants to enjoy life as much as possible, because he believes there is nothing else to enjoy.

And, a person who has a pagan view of life in this world will also have a pagan view of life about the next world. The pagan will view what happens after death with a great deal of uncertainty. He reasons that everything

after this life is uncertain; therefore, it is best to make the most of this life, because this is the only life about which we have any knowledge. So, we have the philosophy to eat, drink, and be merry. Since we don't know what is going to happen next month or next year, the essence of pagan wisdom is to say, "Let's get the maximum pleasure out of life now." Jesus sums it all up by putting it like this, "**For the pagans run after all these things.**" They find their total pleasure in food and clothing and other things that are sure to fade away in time.

THE IMPORTANT QUESTION FOR US IS, "ARE WE LIKE THE pagans?" Our philosophy of life is revealed by the way we react when the stock market goes up or down or when our job is threatened or when our health is attacked or when something does not go our way. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so he is." We curse and swear. We become irritated and angry and lose our tempers. We worry.

If we want to increase our faith, we must make a conscious effort to be different from the pagans. Those who are in the habit of cursing and swearing when things go wrong need to make up their minds to be different. And, and of course they must realize that a change of behavior must be linked to a change in thinking, because pagan-like behavior is the natural outflow of pagan-like thinking. In order to increase our faith, we must replace pagan thinking with Biblical thinking. What I mean is this: **We must take everything that happens to us and put it in the context of our relationship with God and everything we know and believe about God.** This is something the pagan cannot do. If he could do it, then he would not be a pagan.

Jesus wants us to rise up to the level of who we are in Christ. This is why He tells us to be different from the pagan. We need to exercise discipline and control. The words that come out of our mouths often betray us. In our unguarded moments we often reveal that we are running after the same things that the pagans run after and for the same reasons. Our Lord says, "**For the pagans run after all these things...**" The implication is that, if we want to increase our faith, we must be different from the pagans. This is the first argument.

The second argument requires less time to explain, because it is a repeat of what has already been said when Jesus used the illustrations of the flowers and birds to emphasize our relationship to God. At the end of verse 32 we find these words, "**Your heavenly Father knows that you need them.**" Our heavenly Father knows what we need to survive. Therefore, if we lack faith, the way to increase faith is to increase our reliance upon God as our heavenly Father.

Over the years I have watched my earthly father come to the assistance of my siblings when they faced crises after crises. From my own earthly father, I have gained an understanding of what a father should be like. But, it has been an imperfect picture, because no earthly

father is perfect. I can't imagine my earthly father turning his back upon any of us children when he is aware that we are faced with a basic survival need. But, I also know that my earthly father is limited in his ability to help. He is not a rich man with an unlimited supply of money, and right now his finances are being stretched to the limit to help children who are in need. And, my earthly father is also limited in his ability to understand the basic needs of his children. There may be basic needs of which he is unaware.

But, our heavenly Father is not limited in His ability to understand the needs. HEBREWS 4:13 says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." Your heavenly Father not only is aware of every financial need you have, He also knows when you are suffering bereavement and sorrow, He knows every pain of the heart. He knows everything.

And, our heavenly Father is unlimited in His ability to supply our needs. If I really want to understand my heavenly Father, I must take the good I have seen in my earthy Father and multiply it times infinity.

If we can only grasp this concept, then our faith would increase, and the worry and anxiety would be banished forever. Jesus was able to grasp this concept. In the very shadow of the cross, when His needs were the greatest, Jesus spoke these words, "**But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.**" Those precious words are recorded in JOHN 16:32. Oh, that we may be like our Lord so that, in the face of every crisis, we may say, "I am not alone, for my heavenly Father is with me."

The third argument given by our Lord to help us increase our faith is found in verse 33. "**But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**" Here we have an appeal to focus our concentration upon improving and perfecting our relationship with God our Father. This is not an appeal to non-Christians to make themselves Christian. It is an appeal to Christians to become more like Christ.

In the first argument, Jesus told us not to seek or run after the things pagans run after. Now He is telling us to seek a better relationship with God. It's almost as if Jesus were saying, "Don't worry about food and clothing. These are the things that pagans worry about. If you want to worry, I'll tell you what to worry about. Worry about your relationship to the Father! That is the thing to concentrate on. That is the thing to run after."

This thought is supported over and over again in the scriptures. We saw it in the Lord's prayer. The thing we are to seek first in that prayer is not our daily bread; rather, it is for God's Name to be honored and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That must

take priority over everything.

If we want to increase our faith, our seeking must be earnest. HEBREWS 11:6 tells us that God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. We must seek His kingdom and work diligently to see His church established. Those who wait until they have gotten all their earthly things and earthly relationships in order before they diligently serve in God's kingdom will not increase their faith.

And, besides seeking God's kingdom, we must also seek His righteousness with all of our hearts. Here we are talking about a strong desire to be like Christ and to live like Christ.

IN THE TWO YEARS I SPENT SERVING IN CALIFORNIA, I experienced something that I have rarely experienced on the east coast. In the context of a Chinese church, I experienced services with altar calls. Toward the end of my time there, there was an altar call almost every week. Now it may be true that some people came forward for selfish reasons, seeking power without a desire to seek holiness. But, it is also true that some people came forward because their prides were broken and all they wanted was a healing touch from God so they could be made pure and holy. Many times people would not leave the altar until they knew God had met their need. They would weep and they would pray and they would seek with all of their hearts. Corporate prayer meetings were well attended because people cared more about seeking God than they did about seeking after the those things that are going to perish.

I am glad for my California experience, and I miss being in an environment that encourages people to seek God with all of their hearts, and even do it in public. Sometimes I feel that we actually discourage people from such seeking by cautioning them not to be too emotional about their religion. Sometimes I think we make people feel like they are weird when they seek after God with any amount of passion. It shouldn't surprise us when we discover that our practical approach to religion often results in Christians who are full of anxiety and worry. We desperately need to increase our faith. But, we will never do it unless we seek God with all of our hearts.

Let's now turn to *the final argument* which is found in verse 34. **"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."**

Now this argument is unique from the others, because it tells us something about the problem of worry that the other arguments didn't mention; namely, that worry is a powerful force that takes hold of us and won't let go. Even after we have become convinced that things will be OK for the present, we still want to be anxious about the future.

Those who have done any amount of counseling have

observed this fact. I have found it possible to spend a great deal of time trying to bring comfort to someone who is stressed out and worried. I may even use some of the arguments that we have just seen used by our Lord. I try to provide counsel so as to convince a person that he need not worry. Then I hear those familiar words, "Yes, I know what you are saying is right, but..." This "yes, but..." response reveals the power of worry to cling to a person's mind and not let go. It's almost as if the person who is worrying doesn't want to be relieved.

'Yes, I see that things will be OK for now, but what about tomorrow or next week or next month or next year?' If worry can't use the present to defeat us, it will use the future to defeat us. Such is its nature and its power.

Notice the practical argument Jesus uses to deal with this problem. He says, **"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."** I believe we can summarize this statement by saying, "It is foolish to live more than one day at a time."

Each day has its challenges and its trials and its problems. Each day has its quota of challenges. It is foolish to add tomorrow's quota of challenges on to today's quota of challenges. God never meant for us to take on more than one day's quota. When we try to reduce tomorrow's problems by working on them today in addition to what we already have today, a very terrible thing happens to us. We become crippled in the present.

I have seen this happen in the lives of individuals and I have seen it happen in organizations. Great opportunities arise to do worthy things, but people are reluctant to take advantage of the opportunities because they are worrying about the future. This is especially true in how we use our finances. It is all too easy to squander our money in the present, because we are concerned if this or that thing happens in the future, we will be left empty-handed.

Now I know what some people are thinking. Some people are asking themselves the question, "Does this mean it is wrong for a Christian to save money? Is it wrong for a Christian to take out an insurance policy? There is a very delicate balance here that must be maintained. As I have mentioned in the past, we are different from the birds of the air that are fed without plowing and sowing and reaping and gathering into barns. We must do all of those things. But, there is a point where we can take it too far. There is a point at which we cross the line from reasonable thought and care to anxious care and worry. How do we know when we have crossed the point? One way of knowing that we have crossed the point is when we are unwilling to let go of what we have stored for any worthy cause whatsoever.

My sister in Israel has three sources of income. One is

welfare provided by the state. The other is monthly support to pay the rent provided by my father. And, the third is the minimum wage she earns taking care of elderly people. Not too long ago I received an e-mail from my sister describing how she was down to her last few shekels when she met young beggar who had nothing. She found herself willing to give all the remaining money she had to the beggar. Was that reasonable? Is it reasonable to give all that you have away? Each one of us must answer that question ourselves. My point is that if there is no cause worthy enough to make us willing to give everything we have, even our own lives; then we are placing too much emphasis on what we have stored for the future, and we will become anxious and worried at the thought of losing it.

If we want to increase our faith, we should determine that there are causes worthy of sacrificing what we have stored away for tomorrow. And then, we should, day by day, go about looking for those worthy causes.

God may or may not call us to give up what we have stored, but we must be willing to do so if He does. If we are not willing, then we must work to be willing so our faith will grow.

So how does faith grow? It grows when **we declare war on whatever causes us to worry and fret**. It grows when **we determine to be different from the pagan** way of thinking and behaving. It grows when, instead of seeking after things that will perish, **we seek after God**. It grows when **we increase our reliance upon God as our heavenly Father**. And, it grows when we are able to **live one day at a time**, willing on any given day to give up what we have stored for tomorrow should God call us to do so.

So much more can be said about these verses. I can only hope that what I have shared will help faith to grow and worry to cease in all of our lives.