

The Problem of Worry

Matthew 6:25-34

The soul lies hidden within like a subterranean cave, but with the light of divine assistance, King Solomon was able to probe its deepest recesses. One of the things he saw is recorded in Proverbs 14:13a “Even in laughter the heart may be in pain.”

What Solomon means is that things are not always as they appear. The light of smiles and laughter may warm the surface of our lives while the darkness of pain chills the inner depths of our hearts.

Seeping down into the deep interior caverns of our souls is worry. Its metronomic dripping forms piercing stalactites of anxiety, drip by drip, layer upon layer. And although laughter may echo in these hidden chambers, it is a laughter barnacled with worry.

Today, let’s examine worry with a view to stopping its flow into our hearts and dissolving its crusty shroud within.

Biblical Perspective

If you were to search through a concordance, it might surprise you to find that worry is not listed. The Bible actually says much about worry, but the word itself goes by several different aliases, such as care, anxiety, burden, trouble, and fear.

In fact, in Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus uses the word anxious no less than five times. A background check reveals that its origins are tied to the meaning “to be divided or distracted.” So the mission of worry, this invisible insurgent, is always to trouble or distress us. It incites a mental and emotional riot that works against our ability to focus on what we’re doing.

Specific Arguments against Worry

In verse 24 Jesus makes it clear that we must choose between two masters—either God or materialism. If we choose to serve God, worry will inevitably try to distract us from that service. Let’s take a careful look at the rest of chapter 6, where we’ll be able to draw out five arguments against worry from what Jesus has to say.

First: Worry keeps you from enjoying what you have.

“For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
(v.25)

We live in a society whose basic philosophic foodstuffs gorge our worries and only tease our hungry souls. The mind-set tries to convince us that life is only about food and designer clothing labels. And those who are willing to swallow this philosophy develop robust anxieties— anxieties that rob them of the ability to enjoy what they have by keeping their eyes on the things they don't have.

Second: Worry makes you forget your worth.

“Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?” (v.26)

There are well over eight thousand species of birds, and God feeds them all— even those baby rose-breasted grosbeaks that eat 426 times in eleven hours. Yet for all their beauty and diversity, Jesus did not die for a single bird. He died for us. It's hard to believe we could ever doubt our value in God's sight, yet when worry pours its acid through our minds, it blanches our memory of the Savior's love.

Third: Worry is completely useless.

“And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span” (v.27)

We can lie awake and fret all we want, but when morning comes, we'll still have problems. So why do we do it? Because somewhere deep within us is a secret love of worrying. We enjoy entertaining worries. There is always a new line of new ones waiting to get in the door—as we shove one out the back door, we usher a new one in the front. When one worry is gone, we immediately replace it with another.

Fourth: Worry erases the promises of God from your mind.

“But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘With what shall we clothe ourselves?’” (vv.30-31)

When times are lean, it's easy to forget how much God cares about us. Our natural tendency is to check in at worry's twenty-four-hour-a-day clinic instead of asking the Great Physician to make a house call on our lives. Memories of God's promises seep from our consciousness as worry administers massive doses of self-absorption, until we are like spiritual amnesiacs who remember only the most basic questions in life: “What will I eat? What will I drink? What will I wear?”

We forget that God provides for us, and that He has promised to take care of all our needs (see Romans 8:31-32).

Fifth: Worry is characteristic of unbelievers, not Christians.

“For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father know that you need all these things” (Matthew 6:32).

Each day non-Christians face a gauntlet of worries. And the sad part of it is that they must do it alone. As long as they have no heavenly Father to serve, their lives will be spent in servitude to the tyrannical urgings of worry. The Christian, however, can reach out beyond worry’s iron hand and find Another’s, whose scars reassure is that He is there and He cares for us (Hebrews 13:5-6).

These five arguments against worry are essential to know, but, as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Tucked away in the book of Genesis are several candid snapshots of worry at work in the family of Abraham. Let’s leaf through this family album to cement in our minds the devastating and far-reaching effects worry can have.

A Family of Worriers

Every family is different. From the music of some families, great composers are formed. From the generosity of others, great humanitarians are unselfishly shared. And from the disquieted womb of others, great worriers come tumbling forth.

One such family was Abraham’s. Although God had promised to make him a great nation (12:1-3), when a famine came, Abraham moved to Egypt and forgot all about God’s promise, with worry’s distracting help (v. 10).

All parents bequeath to their children different kinds of legacies. One of Abraham’s legacies to his son was the art of worrying. What legacy will you leave to your children?

Practical Applications

After great saints like Abraham and Isaac fail to conquer worry, we poor garden-variety Christians could easily give up hope. But worry isn’t something we’re stuck with. Jesus ends the passage in Matthew 6 with two practical suggestions.

1. Keep your mind on the Lord.
2. Take one day at a time.

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (vv. 33-34)

From other passages of Scripture, we can find four more principles to help us break worry's gravitational pull. The first is presence—claim the presence of God in your life (see Isaiah 41:10). The second is promises—get into the Word of God and learn His assurances (see Psalm 119:14-16). Third, prayer—pray for specific needs, not just generalities (see Philippians 4:6-7). And last, patience—don't allow worry to sell you short and steal the victory that should be yours (see Psalm 27:13-14 and Isaiah 40:31).

Worry is like any other sin. It must first come to us as a temptation, begging for a place to stay. That is the critical moment for us all. Will you keep your mind in fellowship with the Lord? Or will you let worry onto the front porch, give it a drink of water, and chat a bit before you send it on its way? You can bet that before you pour its second glass of water, worry will have you asking it to stay for dinner. When worry comes panhandling at your screen door, send Christ to answer its call instead.