

Nothing to Worry About

In the name of him through whom the Father is delighted to give us the kingdom, dear friends in Christ: This morning we hear Jesus telling his followers not to worry or fret about how they're going to acquire the basic necessities of life. He specifically mentions food and clothing, which way back then were big ticket items. Think about it: they had no tractors, planters, or harvesting machines; no commercial fertilizers, pesticides, or weed killers; they had no genetically altered high-yielding hybrid seeds. All the work was done by hand using fairly crude tools – which means that food was comparatively very expensive. When you could get it, that is. If the weather didn't cooperate, if the locusts came, if an enemy army invaded, whatever – anything that might cause a crop failure, there'd be nothing to eat. Same with clothing: there were no textile mills cranking out endless yards of inexpensive fabric. Instead, countless hours were spent spinning wool or flax fibers into threads, which in turn were weaved together into cloth on hand looms. It was extremely labor intensive – which again means that clothing was comparatively high priced. Forget the idea of having a closet full of clothes. You were lucky if you had two tunics (think of a sleeveless T-shirt that went down to your knees) and one thick mantel or over-garment to wear when it was cold. And you'd wear these items until they were completely worn out, because you'd want to put off replacing them as long as possible. The result of all this was that the questions "What am I going to eat?" and "What am I going to wear?" and "How am I going to provide these things for my family?" were never far from anyone's mind. It was a constant concern and an ongoing struggle.

Far more so than for us in our day, when both food and clothing are relatively cheap and always available. We're not likely to have big worries about what we're going to eat or wear; but we have other things that make us anxious, don't we? How am I going to pay the mortgage or the rent, and for the utilities and the phone bill, and for the roof that needs replacing? How am I going to afford new tires for the car and for the work that needs to be done on the transmission? How am I going to pay for health care and medical insurance? And for the kids' college? And for my retirement? And who knows what else? Fill in the blank. We have daily expenses the first followers of Jesus never could have imagined. And to us Jesus says, "Don't worry about them."

Which is awfully easy to say; but not so easy to do. In fact, it makes things worse because not only do I keep on worrying about these sorts of things; but now I have to worry that I'm disobeying Jesus by committing the sin of worrying about things he told me not to worry about. Great. Now I'm really sunk.

Unless ... unless we're not looking at this right. Some of you will probably hate me for mentioning it and getting it stuck in your head, but there was a song written in the late 80s by Bobby McFerrin. It was one of those one hit wonders that made it to the top of the charts for too long a time in my estimation. It had Caribbean island kind of sound and the repeated refrain "Don't worry. Be happy." Do you remember it? The gist of it was that it's up to you: when horrible things are happening in your life, if you lose your job, your home, or anything else, it's just a question of outlook. Simply decide not to worry and be happy. There. Done. Easy. Right? I'm happy! And why should you do this? Well, according to the song you shouldn't worry because that makes you frown. And when you frown you bring everyone down; so worrying only makes things worse. Truth be told, most of us have enemies who would like nothing more than seeing us frown and be miserable. So the song is wrong. But more

importantly, it never gets to the *how*. How does one simply stop worrying about getting and hanging onto the things needed to sustain this life?

One way, we think, is simply to acquire enough stuff and money to ensure that we'll never run out. If I amass a sufficiently large pile of wealth – oh, and wisely distribute it in real estate, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and certain amount of gold bullion – I can guarantee that I'll be covered. But how much is enough? How much would you need to cover every potential crisis or unforeseen loss? That's a problem, isn't it? You don't know what the future holds. So you can never be sure that you're adequately prepared for it. You still have to worry about what might happen.

Besides, even if you could build up a big enough fortune to cover all your future expenses – if that were possible – you'd still be on shaky ground. Proof of that comes right before today's text, when Jesus relates the story of a certain rich man who enjoyed a particularly successful year. Now, he was already rich, but on this favorable occasion his extensive land holdings produced a super abundant crop. When he ran the numbers and figured out the value of all he had stored up, he realized that he'd achieved it. He'd never have to work again. No more worries. He said to himself, "Take it easy. Relax, O my soul: eat, drink, and be merry." He thought he was very clever. He thought he was very successful. The Lord called him a fool and a failure. Why? Because he had spent his life building a fortune on earth while neglecting his far more valuable soul. He had focused his energy and brainpower on ensuring his temporal welfare while never giving a thought as to where he would spend eternity. And as soon as he arrived at his destination of imagined guaranteed financial security, the Lord said, "Today you must give an accounting for your soul." What does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his own soul? Worse than nothing.

It's in view of this that Jesus tells us not to be anxious or to worry about having the things needed to sustain this life. If our focus is on things, if that's where our trust and hope for the future is, then we can only lose. Ah, but if our focus is on the Giver of those things, if we learn to know him and his benevolent character – that's what will turn our hearts from worry and fretting to surety and confidence. Since we don't know what the future holds, we need to concentrate our hearts and minds on the One who holds the future.

And so it is that Jesus directs us to consider the ravens. They don't go around stockpiling food and worrying about what they're going to eat tomorrow; but every day the Lord gives them what they need. He has so designed the natural world to ensure that all his creatures are fed. And you, who are the crown and capstone of his creation, whom the Lord fashioned in his own image, do you imagine that he isn't going to take care of you too?

You see, it's because of God and his loving character that we need not be anxious – which is an interesting word, by the way. It's often misused. People use it to mean looking forward to something positive, like when they tell a loved one "I'm anxious to see you." The trouble is that the word actually means to be filled with anxiety or fear. And it comes from a Latin root word that means to torture. So it really isn't complimentary to say to someone, "It tortures me and fills me with fear to think about seeing you." If you like them, it's better to say, "I'm *eager* to see you."

But that aside, that's what being anxious does: it tortures you. It's self-inflicted misery. And it serves no good purpose. Jesus asks, "Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his life?" It's an idiomatic expression that's sometimes translated differently. What he actually says is "Which of you can add a cubit (that is, about 18 inches) to his measure or

distance or length". It's uncertain whether he means distance in terms of height or in terms of length of lifespan. So some translations will say, "Who can add several inches to his height by worrying?" Now, I've never been able to make myself any taller, but I have had fairly good success at adding inches to my waistline over the years. But it wasn't achieved by worrying. And it's probably not a good thing. The point that Jesus is making, however, is that if worrying can't make even tiny improvements in your life, why waste the time and suffer the needless anguish doing it to yourself?

Again he directs our focus to the Lord and giver of life who clothes the grass of the field in floral splendor that Solomon in his glory would have envied. If God is that concerned about the nearly worthless grass on the hillsides, which lives today and tomorrow is fuel for the fire, how can you begin to imagine that he isn't far more concerned for you – for you his dearly beloved child?

Thus Jesus tells us not to look for assurance in the things that we need, in stockpiling and storing earthly treasures, but rather to place our trust and hope in the Lord who so richly and freely provides us everything we need. That's what will keep us from worrying: knowing the Lord God and his heart of love for us. It's the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom, Jesus tells us; not just food and clothes and whatever else you need to survive – but an eternal home in glory with him. And if you ever have doubt of that, if you ever have reason to question his loving good will toward you, you have only to look at the great length and expense to which he went to make you an heir of his kingdom. He gave his Son for you. For you the eternal Son of God became a man. Upon him the Father laid the guilt of all your sins – including the sin of faithlessly worrying about material things. On the cross God's Son suffered the infinite debt of torture that you owed. He died for you. And on the third day he rose for you – rose to show you that you too will be raised in an immortal body that will never get sick or grow old or suffer from lack of anything. He did all that and more to guarantee your future welfare in eternity. Do you imagine that he's going to neglect you tomorrow or the next day for your merely temporal needs? It's absolutely unreasonable. It doesn't make any sense.

And this is why we are not to be fearful or anxious for the necessities of this life. It's not so much that Jesus is saying, "Don't worry" as if we are committing an unforgivable sin by doing so; it's rather that by concentrating on our gracious God and his boundless love for us in Jesus our Savior, we will see that with all things in his hands we have nothing to worry about.

May the Lord through his powerful Word and Spirit give us the grace and faith to believe it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!