

Worry . . . p. 1

Last week we looked at Jesus' teaching about money and material possessions. We noted three things that He said about them:

1. That you're better off - and more secure - in storing up treasure in heaven. There's a good chance of losing the stuff you store up here on earth
2. That it's better to be generous than to be stingy, that a "good eye" or a "generous eye" brings light to your whole being.
3. That you can't serve two masters, both God and money.

If we put all of those things together, we conclude that Jesus is teaching us to be generous towards others rather than clinging to material things for our security. That generosity will bring eternal reward and nothing can steal that away from us.

The next section of the Sermon on the Mount builds on this teaching. In it, Jesus addresses the logical consequence of a life based on material prosperity - worry:

So I tell you, don't worry about everyday life - whether you have enough food, drink and clothes. Doesn't life consist of more than food and clothing? Look at the birds. They don't need to plant or harvest or put food in barns because your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to Him than they are. Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? Of course not! And why worry about your clothes? Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, won't He more surely care for you? You have so little faith!

So don't worry about having enough food or drink or clothing. Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for Him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:25-34)

What do Canadians worry about? Perhaps this will not be a surprise to you, but almost half of our population are worried about money - especially with their answer to the question, "Will I have enough for retirement?" They also worry about rising costs, including the steep prices of quality food and the ever-increasing cost of housing. More than half of Canadians are worried about global warming and a significant percentage are worried about immigration of refugees - although we are apparently more anxious about Americans in general than we are about Syrians or Iraqis. This year we might be more worried about war between the U.S. and North Korea and next year it might be about war between the U.S. and Iran, or even China. Every day there are things that can rob us of peace of mind. Every day there is a new report of something that is troubling. Someone will suggest that the trade wars that the current U.S. President has commenced will result in economic collapse and huge losses to retirement accounts in Canada as well as in the U.S.

Some people don't talk openly about their worries: things like relationship struggles, personal health issues, or the challenges of dealing with aging. And some don't want to talk about why they feel less safe in their neighbourhood than they did years ago. But we can be sure that there are lots of issues that cause people anxiety, lots of stress-inducers in our world, and that we need to hear Jesus' words in light of our own anxiety.

Let's look at the counsel Jesus gives us in this part of His Sermon on the Mount. What does He tell us that can help us deal with worry?

1. He tells us what we knew already - that worry doesn't help at all. We can't change anything just by worrying about it. What He doesn't say in this passage is that worry actually takes away from our ability to cope well with the challenges we face. When we are anxious, we are less likely to sleep well, less likely to take the necessary time to make wise decisions and more likely to panic. Worrying about a situation doesn't make that situation any better, but it can make our response to that situation a lot worse.
2. Jesus tells us that life is bigger than the concerns we feel for our finances, the necessities we need to pay for somehow or the other issues that we get concerned about. "Doesn't life consist of more than food or clothing?" He asks. In saying that, Jesus is asking us not to get distracted by the everyday needs and neglect the bigger issues that need to be taken seriously.
3. He tells us that today's trouble is enough for today. We've got enough on our plates without worrying about what might happen, or not happen, tomorrow.
4. The fourth thing Jesus says is what I want to focus in on for the rest of our time today, and that is that you are special to God and He is concerned about you and that He is able and willing to take care of your needs.

Let's look at what Jesus says about our relationship with the Father:

1. Your Father feeds birds and you are far more important to Him than the birds are
2. Your Father clothes the flowers of the field and makes them beautiful, even though they are only around for a short time
3. Your Father knows every one of your needs
4. Your Father will give you all you need from one day to the next, if you'll only live for Him and make the Kingdom your primary concern.

In addition to these points about the Father's care, there are a couple of strong warnings in this passage, some words with "edge" to them:

1. You have so little faith!
2. Why imitate the pagans and worry about the things they worry about?

Let's dig into all these points a little deeper.

What is a bird's life like? What is a flower's life like? The birds are busy at certain times of the year, collecting the things with which to build a nest and, always, gathering food for the day. When their babies are hatched and still in the nest, the birds have the extra chore of finding food and bringing it back to the nest for their little ones. Then,

they have the job of teaching their offspring to fly, to find food, to fend for themselves. Through all of this, the birds have lots of time to sing.

That's what I notice. Birds make a nest, gather food, raise their young, sing and fly. They don't worry - at least they don't seem to worry much. They don't have mortgage debt, they don't struggle with emotional tensions or relationship problems - at least not obviously. They sing and they fly, they build and they eat, and God says that He's taking care of them.

A flower grows up, like the flowers we've just been enjoying in the early spring, blooms with its beautiful colours, either scatters its seeds or multiplies its bulbs, and then it's gone. And Jesus tells us that our Father "wonderfully cares" for the flowers, providing them with a beauty that we enjoy, that blesses us.

But Jesus isn't just trying to tell the world that birds and flowers are under God's watchful eye and loving care. No, His point is that God cares much more about you. "And you are far more valuable to Him than they (the birds) are." That means that God is concerned that you are supplied with the things you need to live. And if He is concerned, why should you be? Why should you take on to yourself the stress of worrying about your basic needs if God has said, "I've got this"?

And then Jesus lets slip the reason for our anxiety: "You have so little faith!" What does He mean? He means that we don't believe the simple truth that He is telling us: that our Father in heaven knows what we need and that He cares enough to supply our needs. How do we know if we have faith? We look at our thoughts, our actions, our burdens, and ask if they demonstrate a conviction that God is good and that He loves and cares for us ... or do they show that we are just like people in the world and just as anxious about our daily needs.

The issue of faith is the answer to the question, "What do you put your hope in?" If the thing you set your hopes on is having things so that you can enjoy life more, then you will most likely always be discontent or anxious, because it's so difficult to come to the point of saying, "That's enough. I'm okay now." You'll always feel like there's something more to life, like the person I once knew who was forever wanting to trade in their boat for another one: "I just want two more feet in length - I always want two more feet in length."

Another reason this kind of hope doesn't satisfy is that its root is in what other people think about you. It's not that you feel better about yourself if you have a bigger boat - or faster car, or newer house, but that you hope that others think more highly of you. And what people think about you is, a) often difficult to determine and, b) often subject to change over things you have no control over. Those kinds of uncertainties create an anxiety about how we're really doing in life.

Here's Jesus' answer to that - and this time I'll read it from the New International Version:

But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (6:33)

Or, as we saw it earlier in the New Living Translation:

He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for Him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.

If our lives are headed in the right direction - if our focus is on what God wants and on the purposes of His Kingdom on this earth - then we have no reason to be anxious about our daily needs. We can relax about those things and give our time and energy to what's truly important.

There's one other punchy phrase that I haven't looked at yet, but it carries a lot of weight. Again, we'll look at the NIV first, then the NLT:

For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

Why be like the pagans who are so deeply concerned about these things? Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs ...

Jesus is basically telling us that if we get our cues to life from the world, we will face the same anxieties and stresses that they do. If we get our cues from our heavenly Father - if we believe that He is like Jesus is saying here that He is like - then we can live in peace and sing like the birds.

So, how do we pick up these cues and how can we learn to live by faith? These are the questions of most importance to this passage. I want to answer these questions as if they are one, because I think they present one issue. How does a Christian grow in faith, in daily confidence that we are loved and cared for and provided for by our Creator? And, especially, how do we continue in that faith during times we consider to be challenging, times when we wonder if God has abandoned us?

First off, there has never been a time in history when people could say that there was nothing to worry about. For thousands of years, a large portion of the world had to worry about survival, about finding or preserving enough food to stay alive. That's not our worry. We always know there's another potluck around the corner. Or we know that, if we were hungry, there are people here who love us and would be happy to feed us.

Just knowing that puts some perspective on the things we are worrying about. When we start to worry about our health and whether we'll have enough of it to do what we want to do in the time that's left to us, we can gain perspective by remembering that less than 400 years ago in England people's life expectancy was 35 and on the other side of the Atlantic, in Virginia Colony, it was less than 25. We've been given so much time, but how often do we feel grateful for the time we have and not pressured by the time we don't.

Or if we're worried about the latest virus or some super bug that's going to kill thousands, remember that the Black Plague, or Black Death, took out more than 20%

of the world's population and that it took 200 years to get that population loss back. We have been so blessed by penicillin, by antibiotics, by all kinds of amazing new medicines and treatments - things that simply weren't available centuries ago. And yet, do we stop to express gratitude for being born into such a time as this, to experience so many blessings on so many fronts.

So, here's the first key to growing in faith - and that is simply to practice a discipline of gratitude. Think about things like I've just talked about, things that real people have had to face and struggle to survive, and then thank God that you haven't had to face those same things. Thank Him for every blessing in your life, and every time you think of something good that is coming your way, stop what you're doing and be appreciative for how blessed you are.

How does that build faith? By reminding us, in all aspects of our lives, that our Father has been looking out for us, that He has been faithful to His promises. If you want to grow in your ability to trust your Father in heaven, you need to grow in your ability to see what He's been up to in your past. Maybe you went through a really rough time and you felt at the time like God wasn't helping you enough to get through it. But look back now, and see what you've learned that you couldn't have learned any other way, and see how God did bring you through, stronger, deeper, more in tune with His Kingdom.

The second thing I would suggest today is to make a study of some of the characters that the Bible calls people of faith. A great place to start is with the list that we find in Hebrews 11. "By faith Abel" ... "By faith Enoch" ... "By faith Noah" ... "By faith Abraham". Study the life of Abraham - maybe I'll get to do a sermon series on him someday - and ask yourself what it must have been like to live in those times. Ask yourself how Abraham was able to stand in the times of testing that he went through. How did God relate to him in his failures as well as his victories? What can we learn from him and from his wife Sarah?

Or study the life of Joseph or the life of Moses. Ask yourself how they demonstrated faith in God and how their faith grew over time. Go to the book of Judges and study the faith of Gideon. He was encountered by an angel while he was hiding from Israel's enemies and he made excuse after excuse for not leading a small army in overthrowing these Midianites. And yet he is mentioned in a list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, as is Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, and Barak, the leader of Israel's armies who wouldn't fight unless the prophetess Deborah went with him.

These are people held up as examples of faith because they had just enough confidence in God's word to act on it. Rahab's act was to hang a red cord out of her window in hopes the spies would remember their promise. Barak and Gideon did lead their people in victory over their enemies, even though they seemed reluctant to begin with. We can learn about what faith is and how to grow in it from reading about what these people did in response to God's word to them.

A third very practical way to grow in faith is to take a good hard look at whatever it is you worry about. Imagine as you do that Jesus is standing right behind your shoulder and is looking at the same thing you're looking at. Ask yourself if this thing that's causing you anxiety is something that Jesus feels anxious or unsure about. Ask Him to build in you the confidence that He showed in His Father. Ask Him to help you to know deeply the Father's concern for you and His willingness to help in your time of need.

When something worries you, you have a choice in how to respond. You can brood on the thing, let it grow in your mind and heart, give it more of your emotional energy than it deserves, or, you can, actually, give it to God. And by that I mean, you tell the Lord that you're being consumed by something that He knows and cares about and you know you need to let go of it. Then you offer it to Him and ask Him to take that burden from your heart. And once you've done that, you need to join the birds and sing a song of praise to the One who both made you and who loves you completely. Just be careful with the flying thing.