

Strangled by Worry

Breaking up Stony Ground, Part 2

Matthew 6:25-34

Wilson Mizner, a playwright born in the late 1800's once said with humor and insight – and I quote – “Life is a tough proposition . . . and the first hundred years are the hardest.”

That's so true.

The words “life” and “tough” . . . go hand in hand.ⁱ

There are plenty of things that cause us to worry; not just those little nagging worries that make you want to bite your nails, but those big worries in life that cause ulcers and destroy faith and cripple courage.

They become – as one author wrote – mental monsters that crawl into your head, then go with you to bed and steal your sleep – these relentless worries that never take a vacation.ⁱⁱ

One watchdog organization listed the top 10 worries of the late last century (the late 1990's) to include: AIDS, nuclear waste, global warming, famine, the federal deficit, pollution and more. That same organization catalogued new worries that now include in this century, terrorist attacks, full-scale war, the risk of losing your job and growing old alone and uncared for.ⁱⁱⁱ

One Gallup poll of teenagers asked them the question, “What is your overall feeling toward life” and the majority of them said, “Fear”.

Frankly, no matter what century you live in . . . no matter what country you live in . . . no matter what generation you live in . . . there will always be plenty to cause even the believer to lose heart and give in to incessant, debilitating worry.

One author put it this way. Worries cast dark shadows on our future . . . stubborn anxieties work like petty thieves in the dark corners of our thoughts as they pickpocket our peace and kidnap our joy.^{iv}

The truth is, the believer is not immune to worry just because he's been vaccinated by saving grace.

Worry is a temptation – that is ever ready . . . clever in its slither can wrap itself around the legs of Christians and cause them to trip up as much as any other sin.

Yes . . . sin.

We're about to discover that Jesus Christ has forbidden worry.

I would agree with the commentary of John MacArthur on *Matthew chapter 6* where I invite you to turn.

He writes, Worry is the sin of distrusting the promise and providence of God, and it is the sin that Christians commit perhaps more frequently than any other sin.^v

In other words, worry makes us take sides with the Enemy in concluding that God is not capable in His promises and not worthy of our trust and our worship.

Listen, anything that denies the power and trustworthiness of God is . . . let's be real . . . and honest . . . anything that denies the power of God and the faithfulness of God has to be categorized as sin.

Little wonder that Jesus will command us to resist this particular temptation.

Notice His command in *verse 25*. ***Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.***

Now let me stop here and provide a contextual disclaimer. This paragraph follows the previous challenge to not become a slave to possessions. In other words, don't allow money to become your master.

Make God alone your master.

If you make money your master you will always be rediscovering the fact that you never have enough. But if you make God your Master, you will always be rediscovering that – *He – is – enough*.

But listen; let's not simply, pietistically say that all worrying and anxious thoughts are sinful.

Paul expressed his deep concern – in fact, he wrote to the Corinthians, ***“There is this daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11:28)***

And didn't Jesus also tell us to count the cost – to think through and plan for and even anticipate pitfalls (*Luke 14*)?

So let's pause for a moment and take a look at this word here in this context.

The word Jesus uses here is *merimna* – which simply means to have concern. It can be a healthy

thing – Paul used the exact same word when he talked about his concern for the churches he’d planted that Jesus forbade here in Matthew 6.

Anxiety then can had good expressions, but it can also become sinful.

The English origin of the word for worry sums up the negative or sinful context of its meaning.

The word “worry” is derived from the old German word “würgen” which means to choke . . . or to strangle. Over time, the word came to refer to “mental strangulation” . . . literally the condition of being harassed with anxieties and care.^{vi}

In other words, the kind of worrying that Jesus forbids here – as I’ll show you further – isn’t the kind of constructive worry that makes you plan and think through potential pitfalls; it isn’t the kind of anxious concern over the spiritual well-being of your children or other believers or even the church; this kind of worry is a choking off of faith – it is the strangulation of trust in God that ultimately denies His ability to protect and provide and empower.

And that’s exactly the kind of scene Jesus will now illustrate over and over again.

Jesus basically forbids the believer to be strangled by unhealthy anxiety or worry.

In this context, let me show you 5 reasons why worry is wrong.

1. First, worry distorts our perspective

Notice what the Lord says further in *verse 25b*; ***Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?***

What the Lord is doing is building a case against worry by going from a greater to lesser argument.

He’s effectively saying, “Look, life is greater than food and clothing. And if God is able to give you life – the greater challenge – don’t you think He can take care of sustaining life – which is a lesser challenge.

Let me illustrate it this way. I took my daughter’s Volkswagen Bug over to the Dealership to get a bulb replaced in her front headlight. You know, in most cars or pickup trucks, you just loosen a screw or two, pop off the plastic cover and put in a new light. Not in a Volkswagen Bug. You have to take off the roof – take out the engine . . . roll down the windows, take off the tires and then you they can replace the bulb.

And they charge you for all that labor.

Next door to the Volkswagen dealership is a Mercedes dealership. That’s where people go who can’t afford a Chevy Pickup . . . they have to settle.

Can you imagine me going into that showroom – and they’re showing for a limited time the 1937 Von Krieger Roadster on the showroom floor – it’s up for public sale and expected to sell for somewhere around 10 million dollars . . . and I whip out my checkbook and write out a check for 11.2 million dollars (which is what it sold for recently) and the media goes wild and the flash bulbs are snapping away, but just before I hand that salesman my check I stop and say, “Now wait, what’s the gas mileage on this Roadster . . . I mean, gas is over 3 bucks a gallon . . . can it get 25 miles to the gallon in the city? If it can’t, I’m going to have problems affording this car.”

People who spend 11 million dollars on a car aren’t thinking about gas mileage . . . in fact, they’re not *thinking!*

You see, this is the distorting process of worry. If God can create life . . . do you think He can provide a meal for that life?

Don’t be tempted to think that these people in Jesus’ day had it so much easier than we do today. I mean, we’ve got reasons to worry, right?

Well, if you travel back to the days of Christ, you discover people living hand to mouth. Water was scarce; food was often a problem; the average worker was paid every day rather than weekly or monthly, because they needed the money to take care of the food they would need for the next day.

They didn’t store food and there were no refrigerators to keep milk or eggs fresh; Jesus would teach them and us to pray for our daily bread . . . they knew nothing of bread for a week or month.

Their government gave them no such thing as social security or retirement and their jobs offered no pensions; the average worker paid as much as 40% of their income to taxes.

And Jesus Christ said to them – Stop worrying . . . don’t be strangled by your worries . . . if God has the power to create your life – He has the power to take care of your life.

The second reason Jesus gives to run from worry is this:

2. Worry depreciates our worth

Before we read this verse, get this scene into your mind. The Lord is sitting on a hillside just above the Sea of Galilee; the people are seated around and

below him in this natural amphitheater – the birds are plentiful in this region and the Lord decides to make some of them his first illustration.

Look at verse 26. Look at the birds (this is a literal command) – look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

John Stott, who pastored All Soul’s Church in London for years, now in heaven, wrote on this text, “Some readers may know that I happen to have been since boyhood an enthusiastic bird-watcher. I know, of course, that bird-watching is regarded by some as a rather eccentric pastime; they view the likes of me with amusement. But I claim Biblical warrant for this activity. “Consider the birds of the air,” said Jesus; and this in basic English could be translated, “watch birds”! Indeed I am quite serious, for the Greek verb in this command means, “Take a good look at [them].”^{vii}

Take a good look at them; Jesus says . . . they are your antidote to anxiety. They don’t plant gardens or fields; they don’t build barns and yet they instinctively gather food.

By the way, if you happen to enjoy watching birds – as my wife and I love to do – now that we’re done watching kids – many of you don’t have time to watch birds . . . you’re watching babies!

Marsha installed hummingbird feeders and several other feeders in our back yard on the other side of that strip of green grass, you remember, where all that natural area is?

We can now watch several different kinds of sparrows, wrens, chickadees, robins and wrens and blue birds, cardinals, doves, a mockingbird that loves to come and scare all the other birds away . . . he’s such a tough guy.

The creativity of God is incredible – the detail of their designs and the color patterns on their wings and faces and all the different sounds they make.

And here’s His point. If God created them with the instincts needed to find the food He ultimately provides – if God would do that much for a bird – a creature not created in His image; not created to co-reign with Him one day – not created for intimate worship and personal fellowship – if God did all that He did to care for birds, imagine what He plans to care for you!

Notice what Jesus says at the end of *verse 26*. **Are you not of more value than they?** You can render that, “Are you not worth much more than they?”

This is radical teaching!

- Human beings are worth more than the animal kingdom?
- God places a higher value and a greater priority on human beings than he does animals?
- Where would you ever come up with that idea?

Jesus did.

Can you imagine living in a country that reverses God’s created order and places a higher value on an animal than on a human being?

Travel with me to India today where sacred cows meander down city streets past starving children . . . and you’ll wonder like I did how much barbecue you could make with just one of those cows and feed all of those children.

That cow has more value than the life of those children.

Worry does the same thing as an idolatrous culture. Jesus Christ effectively says, “Worry steals your sense of worth . . . worry depreciates your God-created value.”

And when you are strangled with worry, you are tempted to believe that God probably cares more about chickadees than He does His children.

But it’s just not true.

Worry distorts our perspective

Worry depreciates our worth

3. Thirdly, worry destroys productivity

Notice *verse 27*. **And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?**

Your translation might read, **Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his stature?**

The words used here can be understood as a reference to either an hour of life or inches of height, depending on context.^{viii}

Either way gets the point across.

Worrying won’t make you one inch taller. Or to be exact here – he uses the term cubit – for 18 inches.

Can you imagine how silly it would be to think that by worrying you’re going to grow 18 inches?

I can remember as a little boy, longing to be taller . . . longing never made it happen.

Neither can you by worrying add one more hour into your span of life.

And listen, you can worry yourself to death, but you’ll never worry yourself to life!^{ix}

Worry is absolutely non-productive.

Worry is like a rocking chair, one author wrote, it gives you something to do, but never takes you anywhere.

It is non-productive, wasted, inefficient and even destructive.

It won't add one hour . . . or one inch.

A.S. Roche once wrote, "Worry is a thin stream of fear trickling through our mind and if encouraged, it will cut a channel into which all other thoughts are drained."

In other words, if you allow it, worry will become a way of life.

4. Even worse, here's a fourth warning about worry; worry denies our faith

Notice *verse 28. And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?*

Your worry has done nothing more than rob God of worship . . . it has denied your faith and trust in His providence.

Now the Lord has pointed to the birds of the air and He now more than likely sweeps his hand across that hillside where wild flowers were growing. The iris and lily and gladioli and scarlet poppy flourished on the landscape where Jesus taught. They bloomed in glorious color ever so briefly and yet in their brief explosion of life and color they put to shame the best clothing King Solomon ever wore.

But then what happened to them?

Jesus takes you into the Middle Eastern kitchen where an oven made of clay was elevated by bricks so that underneath a fire could be built. And when the women wanted to quickly raise the temperature of their ovens, they threw handfuls of dried grasses and these wildflowers into the oven – she was baking in a hurry and needed a quick flash of fire.^x

Here's Jesus' point – if God the Father so creatively designs something that's going to live for a short period of time before being cut down and used to heat an oven; how much more do you think He's going to care to take care of you who just so happen are going to live forever.

Worry isn't some trivial sin . . . it strikes a blow at God's love for us and the integrity of God's

promises to us . . . worry denies our faith in a God who is trustworthy and gracious and sovereign.^{xi}

Worry is essentially distrusting God.^{xii}

Worry distorts our perspective.

Worry depreciates our worth.

Worry destroys productivity.

Worry denies our faith.

5. One more . . . worry denounces our testimony

Notice verse 31. Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat? Or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32. For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

The point is, the Gentiles – an idiom for unbelievers – the unbelieving world is scrambling for these things.

So what makes us any different from the unbelievers if we're panicking and scrambling and scratching after the same things?

Jesus just sort of draws the net into a verdict by basically asking, "Are you going to live and scramble around like unbelievers . . . or act like children who are going to inherit the riches of heaven?"

And in the meantime, act like people who actually believe the promises of God.

Isn't the theme song of the average believer something like, take your burdens to the Lord and . . . take them back. I mean . . . leave them there.

I always get that wrong.

A lady once asked G. Campbell Morgan, the great expositor of the early 1900's, "Do you think God is interested in my little problems?"

He responded, "Ma'am do you think any of your problems are actually big . . . to God?"

But where can the unbeliever go?

To whom can they run to and trust in?

No one!

They've got every reason in the world to worry.

In an article in the Atlantic Magazine – that bastion of conservative theology – in fact, I went online to make sure it was still cranking away and it was – in fact, the feature article this month is entitled, Why I Hope to Die at 75 . . . page after page on why he thinks everybody will be better off if he – and everybody else, dies by the age of 75.

Anyway, in an earlier issue, another author transparently shared – and rather openly – about his lifelong attempts to deal with the anguish of anxiety.

He writes, “Even when not actively afflicted by acute episodes of anxiety, I am buffeted by worry. And here’s how I’ve tried to deal with my anxiety: Individual psychotherapy – thirty years of it; Family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, hypnosis, meditation, self-help workbooks, massage therapy, acupuncture, yoga, philosophy . . . and medication . . . lot of medication. Thorazine, Desipramine, Nardil, Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa, Cymbalta, Luvox, Trazodone, Tranxene, Serax, Centrax, Xanax, Valium, Librium, Klonopin. Also: beer, wine, gin, bourbon, vodka, and scotch.

Here’s what’s worked: nothing.^{xiii}

Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus Christ never commanded something that was impossible? If he commands us to stop worrying, it’s possible.

We must have something the world doesn’t have. We do . . . so where do we start.

The Lord’s antidote to worry is two-fold.

a. The first is, living with a sacred priority.

Notice verse 33. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Put simply . . . pursue the glory of God more than your own health . . . your own needs . . . your own desires . . . make God matter more than anything or anyone.

In fact, the word for seek here in this verse is a word used to refer to the intensity of the hunt for game . . . it involves the entirety of the hunter.

Our dog, Pixie – that little wiry mixture of Beagle and Schnauzer is a perfect example of this kind of intensity. If we want to get her to go out on the deck we’ll say, “Pixie, where’s the squirrel . . . go get the squirrel.” And she bristles with excitement.

I’ve sat out on our deck with Pixie next to me lying down . . . and she’s watching that natural area . . . with pine trees and squirrels. And one of them comes down the tree and she gets up . . . and she will stand there for 20 minutes without moving . . . I even talk to her sometimes . . . Pixie, you can’t catch that squirrel . . . you’re too old . . . she never even looks at me.

Every fiber in her being is focused and intent on one thing – murder.

This verb indicates that a person’s life – his impulses, his attention, his nerves, his reflexes, his focus, his body, and his overwhelming passion . . . is for God to be glorified on earth and forever.

God matters most.

You live with that sacred priority and worry takes a back seat.

By the way, this verb is in the present tense which means you never stop **living with this sacred priority**.

b. The second part of the antidote to worry, is living within a simple boundary

Look at verse 34. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

What a way to end your sermon on overcoming worry . . . “Man, every day is filled with trouble.”

That’s encouraging.

Here’s the point. Develop the art of living one day at a time.

Draw a boundary around the limits of your concern. If it’s yesterday – it’s outside the boundary. If it’s something related to tomorrow – it’s outside the boundary. The antidote to worry is living within this simple boundary.

This is the point Jesus is making – don’t pull tomorrows troubles into today’s deposit of mercy and grace and strength. If you bring yesterday’s griefs and tomorrow’s troubles into today’s grace you’ll exceed the weight limit.

That’s why God divided our lives into bite-sized chunks called “days”. And when you try to chew off more than one day at a time – you choke with worry . . . you begin to strangle on the problems and challenges of life.

One author wrote, “What does anxiety do? It does not empty yesterday of its sorrows, but it empties today of its strength. It does not make you escape the evils of tomorrow but it makes you unable to handle it when it comes.”

Jesus is saying – live within this simple boundary . . . one day at a time.

Don’t be strangled by worry . . . be set free to worship.

How?

By living with this sacred priority – God matters more than anything or anyone; and by living with this simple boundary – living one day at a time.

I close with the words from another Puritan prayer, included in the Valley of Vision book.

*Heavenly Father,
My faith is in Thee,
My expectation is from Thee
. . . I accept Thy Word; acquiesce in Thy will; rely
on Thy promises; trust Thy providence.*

*I have cast my anchor in the port of peace, knowing
that past, present and future are in nail-pierced
hands.^{xiv}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/28/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Chuck Swindoll, Getting Through the Tough Stuff (W Publishing, 2004), p. ix

ii Ibid, p. 33

iii Adapted from Swindoll, p. 34.

iv Ibid

v John MacArthur, Matthew 1-7 (Moody Bible Institute, 1985), p. 419

vi Charles R. Swindoll, Questions Christians Ask, Study Guide (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 19

vii John Stott, quoted by R. Kent Hughes, The Sermon on the Mount (Crossway Books, 2001), p. 221

viii Grant Osborne, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew (Zondervan, 2010), p. 251

ix MacArthur, p. 423

x Adapted from William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 257

xi Adapted from MacArthur, p. 425

xii Barclay, p. 258

xiii <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/february/6020314.html>

xiv Adapted from The Valley of Vision (Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 296