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Learning to Live without worry



Our daughter Madeline was born with a chromosomal disorder and several birth defects, and she died just after her second birthday. During the two years of her life I spent an enormous amount of time worrying, much more than at any other time in my life. As parents we are called to care for our children, so it is natural to be concerned about their well-being. I imagine that much of the worrying that goes on in the world is due to parents' concern for their children.

My wife, Meghan, and I worried so much because we felt overwhelmed by something that we thought we were incapable of handling. We had to feed Madeline through a tube in her stomach, take her temperature often and monitor her vital statistics regularly. We made weekly trips to various doctors, hoping someone would tell us they had some breakthrough medication or procedure that would cure her. We always came home disappointed. We tried to remain optimistic, but we silently worried. When Madeline died, we went

through various stages of loss. Perhaps the only solace was that we stopped worrying about her.

Our son Jacob is a teenager. He has stepped beyond the boundaries of childhood and is becoming a man. He has earned our trust and is going places without our constant surveillance. Consequently we have a new set of worries: *What will happen to our child? Will he be safe? What if someone hits his car? What if he makes bad choices and suffers bad consequences?* There are so many “what if” situations in life that we become overwhelmed if we dwell on them.

Our daughter Hope is now nine years old, and I worry about her as well. I worry that she will be kidnapped. The thought of it is too awful to bear. But we hear stories about that kind of thing and wonder if some deranged person might be lurking outside her school. And I have other common parental concerns: Will she stay healthy? Will her life be free of suffering? Am I a good enough father? Will she make good choices?

Even without children life is full of worries. I also worry about my loved ones and friends. Aging parents, for example, is a cause for concern. And it seems every few months I hear about someone I know contracting a life-threatening disease, losing a job or experiencing the death of a loved one. The newspaper is full of terrible stories of fires and murders, burglaries and kidnappings. Worry always has been a prevalent human problem, but I sometimes wonder if our culture is the worst when it comes to worry. We are exposed to so many fearful things, it seems nearly impossible not to worry.

A CULTURE OF FEAR

What's the best way to sell newspapers and magazines or to increase the ratings for the evening news? Play on people's fears, but do so under the pretext of responsible journalism. You know how it works: “The little freckle on your arm could be a time bomb—story at 10.” Or “Our exclusive report on why drinking too much water could send you to the emergency room.” We are hooked in an instant.

The media plays on our fears to boost their ratings and sales. Scott Bader-Saye calls this the “fear for profit” syndrome. Media executives, advertisers and politicians use fear to motivate and manipulate us. Barry Glassner gets even more explicit: “Television news programs survive on scares. On local newscasts, where producers live by the dictum ‘if it bleeds, it leads,’ drug, crime, and disaster stories make up most of the news portion of the broadcasts.” Then Glassner adds: “Between 1990 and 1998, when the nation’s murder rate declined by 20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased 600 percent.”

But we have enough to worry about even if we never read a newspaper or watch the evening news. Will we ever come to a place where we can do what Jesus clearly commanded: “Do not worry” (Matthew 6:25)?

What can we do to combat the media’s influence?

THE DEFINITION OF WORRY

Before we examine the source of worry, I want to distinguish between caution and worry. Despite their similarity, worry is *not the same* as being cautious or careful. We should be concerned about many things: locking doors, managing our money wisely and driving carefully on slippery roads. This is not the same as worry. Worry is what we do after we have planned, prepared and acted properly. When we continue to stew about something, we have crossed into the world of worry.

Worry is a *disproportionate level of concern based on an inappropriate measure of fear*. Concern, caution and care are all acceptable and even necessary, but worry is what happens when we go beyond these and fear what we can’t control. Worry leads to anxiety; it is impossible to be anxious

How would you distinguish between worry and being careful or cautious? Give an example.

without having first worried. When we feel anxious we can be sure that we are no longer being careful; we are worrying.

We need to be concerned about things worth being concerned about. We know, for example, that wearing a seat belt could save our life, and we are wise to do so. It is important to regularly wash our hands, wear sunscreen when in the sun and look both ways before crossing the street. Learning how to avoid legitimate dangers is *not* what Jesus is addressing in the Sermon on the Mount. He is explaining how worry is both futile and opposed to kingdom living. When we cross the line from being responsible to being anxious, we have turned our focus away from God and his providence. We do this because we have bought into the lie that worrying helps us.

FALSE NARRATIVE: WORRYING PREVENTS PAIN

Worry harms our relationship with God, causes physical discomfort and destroys joy. We can do nothing better with worry than without it. So why worry? What makes us do something that adds nothing to our lives and yet takes so much away? A false narrative that says, “If we worry enough about something, we will prevent bad things from happening.”

We have some concern and do what we can to take care of the potential problem, and we don’t worry about it. Then something goes wrong, and we tell ourselves, *If I had been more concerned about that, I could have prevented it from happening.* Then, when we are faced with some other concern, instead of letting go of the situation once we have done what we could, we continue to worry and fret, night and day. Then the worry turns out to be wrong. This ought to make us worry less in the future (“Gee, why did I worry so much about that? What a waste!”), but instead we worry more. Why? Our narcissistic and superstitious minds interpret the events in another way: *My worrying prevented that from happening. Next time I will worry even more to prevent harm.*

It sounds silly, but this narrative is indelibly marked on the souls of many people. Every time we worry and something bad happens anyway, we overlook the incident. These are *counternarratives*, instances where the dominant narrative is challenged. We usually disregard counternarratives, so the old narrative stays in place. And each time we worry and the bad thing doesn't come to pass, the false narrative is reinforced. In time we are convinced that worrying is a helpful strategy that keeps us from harm. Even though we say we want to worry less, we can't imagine living without it. So when we encounter Jesus' command, "I tell you, do not worry about your life," it appears he is asking us to let go of the one thing that gives us a feeling of control. And that is exactly what he is doing!

Do you relate to the narrative that by worrying we can gain some control in our lives?

JESUS' NARRATIVE: THINGS NOT TO WORRY ABOUT

After discussing the dangers of avarice (Matthew 6:19-24), Jesus addresses the subject of worry through two illustrations:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will

we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. (Matthew 6:25-32)

Jesus says we are not to worry about *food* and *clothing*. These two things are natural human concerns. I think Jesus uses these because they are primary human life needs.

Many people read Jesus’ teaching as if he is saying, “You don’t need to worry about having food or clothing—just have faith. God will provide them for you,” the implication being that with simple

What was Jesus trying to get us to see when he asked, “Are you not of more value than they?”

faith God will drop food into our mouth and fill our closet with expensive clothes. But the reality is that many faithful men, women and children starve each day. Jesus is *not* saying that people who are in-

deed poor and hungry—the kind of people who were listening to this sermon—lack faith and need to trust God more. Telling impoverished people they need to have more faith would be cruel and utterly wrong.

So what is Jesus saying?

In previous sections Jesus prefaced his teaching with, “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you,” indicating that his teaching is opposed to the dominant narratives of his culture. Though he doesn’t say this here, his teaching once again turns a common teaching upside down. The rabbis often contrasted the carefree life of animals with the constant burden placed on humans to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. Jesus uses the examples of the birds to show that while they neither sow nor reap they are provided for. The point: Don’t worry. New Testament scholars Dale C. Allison and W. D. Davies believe that “this novel twisting of an old motif may well

have been deliberate and intended to catch the hearer off guard.”

The same is true with the teaching about flowers. In the Hebrew Bible, when flowers or grass is mentioned, it is to show how fleeting and fragile human life is:

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass. (Isaiah 40:6-7)

So when Jesus mentions flowers, they would have expected him to say, “Just as the flowers are here today and gone tomorrow, so shall you be. Your life is brief. Make the most of it.” Instead he is teaching, “If God takes such great pains to make a little, insignificant flower beautiful, then how much more will he take care of the people he made in his own image.”

We may be tempted to think that Jesus is telling us to trust God to provide our needs without our help. Birds, as we know, are not lazy creatures. They actually work very hard. They do not sit in their nests and wait for God to bring them seeds and berries. They actively seek their sustenance. But they do this without worrying. Jesus’ point is clear: you are worth far more than a bird. In Jesus’ day several birds could be purchased for a handful of change. But we could never put a value on a person. That is Jesus’ point.

Earlier in the Sermon, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” If we turn to God and ask him for our daily provisions, we can trust that he will do so. Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater: if the birds, who are not so valuable and neither sow nor reap, are provided for, how much more will my Father provide for you, his precious and priceless ones, who work hard for what you have?

Jesus is asking us a profound question: if God provides for the smallest and most insignificant creatures, don’t you think he can

provide for you, his most precious and important creatures? It's a logical question that helps us move away from worry and into trust. Worry keeps me focused on my own limited resources. Trust keeps my attention on God's abundant resources. This is why worry cannot exist in the kingdom of God. Worry happens when I am on the throne of my life, when I live in the kingdom of me. But we trust when God is on the throne of our lives and we live in his kingdom. That is why the solution to worrying is to seek first the kingdom.

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM

Matthew 6:33 is the key to the entire Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (NIV). If we understood and applied this verse, every single teaching that has come before and after it would naturally fall into place. This principle—seeking the kingdom first—is the cure for all of the common human struggles we have looked at so far (exclusion, anger, lust, lying, retaliation, vanity and avarice) as well as the problem addressed in chapter eleven: judging others.

What does it mean to seek the kingdom of God first? It means making the reality and the principles of God's kingdom our first and primary concern. It doesn't mean we shouldn't work hard. It doesn't mean we shouldn't care about anything or be responsible stewards of our lives and possessions. We continually look to God and what he is doing in the midst of ordinary life. Seeking the kingdom first means facing our trials and troubles not with anxiety but with trust that God can and will work in them.

There are many things, good things, which will compete for our allegiance. For example: Should we care for the poor? Yes, but first we must seek the kingdom. Should we pray? Yes, but first we must seek the kingdom. Should we fight injustice? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom. Should we walk in the Spirit? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom. Should we go to church, read our Bibles and witness? Yes, but we must first seek the kingdom of God.

Sometimes we focus all of our attention on a cause, a discipline or even a commandment of God, which are all essential aspects of being Jesus' apprentices. But the most important thing is to seek first the kingdom of God. Then everything falls into its proper place. I pray, care for the poor, fight injustice and attend church not because my concern is prayer, poverty, justice or worship, but because my primary concern is what God is doing. When I am concerned about God and his kingdom, I will naturally do these things as they are needed. The moment I put any of them ahead of the kingdom of God, they become idols, though they are good things.

This is why Jesus says with such clarity and authority, "Seek first the kingdom of God." The kingdom is never in trouble. Individual churches and ministries come and go; even our very lives are transient. Churches are viable insofar as they are connected to the kingdom. Our lives are strong and vibrant only as they are lived within the principles of the kingdom. Our wins and losses don't define us. Who we are (indwelt by Christ) and where we live (in the kingdom of God) defines our lives.

Worry prevents us from seeking the kingdom, just as serving mammon prevents us from serving God. They are mutually exclusive. As Allison and Davies point out, "Anxiety is foolish and accomplishes nothing except to put God out of the picture." This is why Jesus inserts this key verse in the section about worry. As long as we are worrying, we can't seek first the kingdom of God. As long as we are seeking first the kingdom of God, we can't worry.

The certainty of kingdom provision led Paul to write these encouraging words:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

He echoes Jesus' words: Do not worry. Instead of worrying, Paul says, we ought to pray. God has instituted prayer as one of his means of caring for us. We are invited to turn our cares into prayers. And when we do, we put the matter into God's hands. This does not take away our responsibility in dealing with our concerns, but it places the concerns in the larger context of the kingdom. It allows God to use the resources of the kingdom to meet our needs. When we do this, Paul says, we discover a peace that surpasses our understanding.

ONE DAY AT A TIME

The final admonition Jesus offers in this section of the Sermon is not to worry about *tomorrow*. "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:34). Jesus knows that we worry about our lives, we worry about having enough, and we worry about how we look. He also knows that we worry about the future and simply states the obvious, but in a comical way, which probably made his audience laugh: "You can't worry about tomorrow today because it is not here! Tomorrow will have enough problems! Let today's problems be enough for today."

Jesus says that the kingdom operates only in the present moment. We can only live in the kingdom today. We can't live in it tomorrow. So worrying about tomorrow is a useless distraction. Just as we count on God today, we can count on him tomorrow. But we aren't in tomorrow, and never will be; we live only in the present, in *today*.

Regarding today's troubles, God is teaching us how to respond to them as they come, one by one. Think of the *I Love Lucy* episode where Lucy is wrapping chocolate candies on an assembly line. At first Lucy does all right, but then the conveyor belt speeds up and soon she is way behind. By adding tomorrow's troubles to today, we double our troubles, which is like speeding up the conveyor belt, and suddenly we lose all margin and cannot keep up. We then suffer from worry sickness.

God is working with me, and his kingdom pace is one day at a time. He has wisely ordered and measured what I can handle. Adding tomorrow's problems to today's is actually impossible, but many of us try to do so anyway. Today is the tomorrow that we worried about yesterday, and it added nothing but misery.

Ultimately, worry is futile. Most of our worries are due to the bad habits we learned while living outside of the kingdom of God, when we trusted in things like money and approval, even though they always disappointed. Jesus encourages us to resist the temptation to worry and concentrate on the fact that God is with us in all that we do, which is the right attitude toward the present and the future. My focus ought to be on the present moment. But when we do think about the future, as kingdom-dwellers we can think with hope, plan with confidence and rely on prayer. We have many past blessings on which to base this confidence.

A PERFECTLY SAFE PLACE

I ask two questions of people going through the apprentice series: Who are you, and where are you? I repeat those questions often because repetition is one of the keys to learning. I am looking for these responses: "I am a child of God, one in whom Christ dwells, and I am living in the unshakable kingdom of God." When a person grasps those two realities, many of the problems that plague him or her begin to diminish. This is certainly true of worry. I think about Paul and the hardships he faced, and how he kept his focus on who and where he was:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Corinthians 4:7-9)

The treasure we have is Christ in us, and our mortal bodies are the

jars of clay. We are Christ-inhabited people, endowed with power to do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

We live in the unshakable kingdom of God, so that even when we are tested, we never fail. This is why I am confident that our world is perfectly safe. *Safe?* you may be thinking. *Are you kidding? This world is scary and dangerous!* That is true if you are on the throne of your life, living outside of the kingdom of God. Inside the kingdom of God we are in no danger.

No danger? You could get cancer, hit by a bus, lose your job or lose a loved one in a heartbeat. Let me say clearly: none of these things can harm those who live in the kingdom. If we die, we step into glory. If we lose a job, we can learn how to trust God for something better. If we lose a loved one, we can be certain that we will soon enjoy their company, for all eternity. As long as we live in fellowship with our good and beautiful God in his mighty kingdom, we have nothing to fear, not even fear itself. For nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). When we know this to be true, we can let go of worry and begin living with confidence and joy.

SOUL TRAINING

Prayer



In this chapter is a verse in which Paul makes a direct connection between prayer and worry:

Do not *worry* about anything, but in everything by *prayer and supplication* with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Once we have done all we can do in a given situation, we simply turn the matter over to God and thus prevent worry from taking over. For example, C. S. Lewis once said that a person who has weeds in his or her garden should not pray about the weeds but pull them up. But when we face situations we cannot change by direct effort, such as a loved one who is ill or a financial problem that extends beyond our resources, then we turn the matter over to God. Here are some practical guidelines to help you turn your cares into prayers this week:

- Each morning set aside ten to fifteen minutes.
- Think about all of the things you might be anxious about.
- Write them down in your journal or a notebook.
- Ask what you can do to remedy each of these situations.
- Make a note to yourself to do the things you can do.
- Turn everything else over to God.

- Write your request to God, and be specific.

Be very specific in your prayers. Why? *Most of our prayers are so vague that we would not even know if God had answered them.* God can handle your specificity. If God has a better way of answering your prayers or dealing with your problems, you can be sure he will. Let him know what you need and desire. Cast your cares on God. Then wait and see what God does.

Prayer helps us deal with our worries in several ways. First, we realize that the provision of the kingdom of God is available to us in every circumstance, large or small. Second, we see things from God's perspective, which puts our problems and concerns in a new light. I find that the practice of writing my prayers forces me to think about my concerns: are they driven by false narrative or centered on the advancement of the kingdom?

This is why I keep a prayer journal. I turn my cares into prayers on a regular basis, and I colabor with God in composing them. This helps my prayer life become a little less selfish. It is hard to write, "God, give me huge amount of money," or "God, can you make my enemies suffer." In the middle of these sentences I would have to stop and laugh at myself. I may actually hope for those things, but they are not legitimate concerns or needs, and they are certainly not driven by seeking the kingdom first.

Prayer is a totally gratuitous gift. God is not obligated to give us this privilege. God gives us this gift to help us discover how loving and caring he is, and to help us grow and mature, which is evidenced by what we ask for. The deeper my heart is in the kingdom of God, the more my prayer life is focused on the well-being of others. This doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for our own needs, but even prayers for our own well-being will reflect the values of the kingdom more than the values of this world.

May you experience the present strength and power of God as you pray, and may your worries diminish with each prayer.