

ANXIETY AND GOD

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Our Gospel lesson from Matthew Chapter 6 speaks of a well known human condition – the condition of being anxious. There is unlikely any man or woman today or in past generations who has not experienced some anxiety in their life time. We all know people who are debilitated by anxiety and who rarely can lift themselves above this deep feeling of nervousness.

Matthew writes these words of Christ: “therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

Let us explore anxiety from a Christian perspective. What is God saying to us about this subject.

In the background and the foreground of the bible one encounters men and women’s anxiety for their life. Anxiety is one element of the full range that extends to intense thought and interest through concern, care, worry, dread, to grief and inward pain. The biblical writers did treat anxiety as a natural part of men and women’s existence. However, anxiety also appears in the Bible in its theological context of being heathenish, sinful, and a denial of God’s providence and care. The opposite of anxiety is seen as the quiet, trustful mind in enjoyment of the peace of God.

In the Old Testament, anxiety appears in the writings in many forms translated as:

- To melt with fear
- To be afraid for or anxious about
- To be irritated or troubled
- To suffer, to be afflicted, to be grieved
- Trembling for or fearful for

In the Old Testament, the pressure of concern, anxiety and fear in the various conditions of men and women’s lives can be detected throughout the writings. Drought leading to threat of famine makes the community anxious. Personal anxiety is witnessed such as Hannah’s worry about having a child. Daniel was anxious over a dream he could not understand. Persons being taken off to another land in exile after Israel lost wars and battles were anxious about their future.

The Psalms often give expression to these feelings of crushing anxiety and care. The sense of sin and distance from God is a terrible burden on the consciousness of the psalmists. They are aware of wicked oppressors and the taunts of their enemies and how their troubles keep them awake at night. They call on God to rescue them from the hand of the oppressor. It is in God’s care they find peace and the release from this severe anxiety. God cleanses and restores. In Psalm 27, the Psalmist says God “will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble.”

Anxiety is seen as a part of the human dilemma. How can we be without any sense of anxiety we may well ask.

The New Testament writings reflect the same concerns as have been noted in the Old Testament. However, in the New Testament view of the Christian life, the new concept is of men and women voluntarily taking on concern for others. While Paul enjoys the generosity of his friends, Paul himself remains anxious for his new converts. He carries on his mind daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches he founded and visited. This illustrates in the New Testament a change in expectation for the Christian: for the Christian, anxiety should switch from the concern for oneself and turn to worries and concerns for the welfare of others.

To Paul, the answer to worry is prayer to God. "Cast all your cares upon Him for he cares about you." "Have no anxiety about anything," Paul states in his letter to the Philippians, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God."

Jesus' teaching on anxiety strikes a new and radical note, for he outlaws anxiety and brands it as pagan and worldly. We read about what Jesus said and we wonder: how can any of us be anxiety free? Yet we read in Matthew of Jesus being deeply concerned for men "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." You will recall that his concern for the future of Jerusalem brought Jesus to tears.

However as for himself and his fortunes, Jesus walked as one whose inward strength and peace could not be undermined by men. He refused to run away before Herod's threats. His critics detect this unshakeable quality when in Mark they said to Jesus "Teacher, we know that you are true, and are bothered by no man."

Perhaps Jesus' clearest teaching on anxiety is found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and Luke. Jesus prohibits anxiety for the most elemental necessities, and also for all the extras we deem as our life's necessities. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on." This is tough stuff for us to hear and to follow.

Jesus is saying the following to us:

1. God gave you life. If he gave you life, then surely you can trust him for the lesser things that support your life. Life properly understood is a greater thing than what sustains it, and man's concern should be centred on life's real purpose. In other words, the living is more important than the needs or desires on which we tend to dwell.
2. Such anxiety for food and clothing ignores God's providential provision in the world. The birds are cared for, Jesus said, and men and women, made in the image of God, can count on God's provision. So his question would be: why do you worry so much when God is near and knows your needs? Why do you pile up so many possessions and money when God is here for you? Stop straining so hard to

see a future which you can not see. Do not seek to find security in things stored up and accumulated against the future.

3. God's sustaining providence proceeds in a way that is independent of man's anxiety. Can men and women by worrying add to their length of life? In other words, where does all this worry get us? Worry itself will not change anything. It is Jesus' argument that worry is pointless anyway.
4. God's care for the flowers is perfect and complete in beauty. If God gives such beauty to a short-lived flower, how much more will he care for us? Surely we who are also His creation can depend on a minimum provision of clothing at God's hand.
5. Worry, Jesus says, is characteristic of a heathen, and not one who knows what God is like. Worry is essentially distrust of God. Such anxiety is pagan and is in direct contradiction of God's knowledge and care. William Barclay writes that such a distrust may be understandable in a heathen who believes in a jealous, unpredictable god; but it is beyond comprehension in one who has learned to call God by the name of Father. The Christian can not and need not worry because he or she believes in the love of God.

Jesus goes on to advance two ways in which to defeat worry.

1. First seek and concentrate on the Kingdom of God. We have to remember that to be in the Kingdom and to do the will of God is one and the same thing (Matthew 6: 10). A way to defeat worry is to concentrate on the doing of, and the acceptance of, God's will. Think of how being in love with someone can drive out all other concerns, It was Jesus' conviction that worry is banished when God becomes the dominating power of our lives.
2. Lastly, Jesus says that worry can be defeated when we acquire the art of living one day at a time. Barclay reminds us of an old Jewish saying: "Do not worry over tomorrow's evils, for you know not what today will bring forth. Perhaps tomorrow you will not be alive, and you will have worried for a world which will not be yours." If each day is lived as it comes, if each task is done as it appears, then the sum of all the days is bound to be good. It is Jesus' advice that we should handle the demands of each day as it comes, without worrying about the unknown future and the things which may never happen.

These thoughts, teachings and words of Jesus are difficult for us to comprehend. When Jesus warns us about the "cares of this world", he couples this with "delight in riches" and the "desire for other things" which all get in the way of where we should be heading. In Luke 21: 34, Jesus warns: "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life." Jesus appears to banish all such anxieties as unfit for life in the kingdom.

Our question is this: did Jesus really intend this teaching on anxiety to be taken literally? Jesus was saying that those who follow God and accept the new life will have found a new orientation for their life. Now God's will controls all purposes and goals. Men and women are no longer to live in anxious self-centredness, but are to live in

gratitude for God's great gift of the kingdom. In this kingdom, all our desires and concerns find their true place and their true proportion, for God's will and provision extends to our humblest needs as it does to our higher goals.

Barclay reminds us that Jesus saw worry as folly. Following is a summation of his comments on Jesus and worry:

1. **Worry is needless, useless and even injurious.** Worry can not affect the past, for the past is past. We can not disassociate ourselves from our past but the past is best to be used as a learning experience rather than brooding over what was or might have been. Equally, worry about the future is useless. Worry about the future is wasted effort, and the future of reality is seldom as bad as the future of our fears. Worry is often injurious as well. Stomach ulcers and coronary thrombosis are often the result of worry. Worry can affect our judgment, lessens our powers of decision making and finally renders us incapable of dealing with life. There is an old saying which goes something like this: let a man give his best to every situation – he cannot give more – and let him leave the rest to God.
2. **Worry is blind.** Worry refuses to learn the lessons from nature itself. Worry refuses to learn the lessons of history.

The Psalmists often when in despair reminded themselves what God had done in the past and they were cheered to face the future as a result. Worry also refuses to learn the lessons of life. Let us think back on our own experiences and lessons we have learned about life. We are still alive and our heads are still above water; and yet if someone had told us that we would have to go through what we actually have gone through, we would have said that it was impossible. The lesson of life is that somehow we have been enabled to bear the unbearable and to do the undoable and to pass the breaking-point and not to break. The lesson of life is that worry is unnecessary.

Worry is essentially irreligious. Worry is not caused by external circumstances. In the same circumstances one person can be absolutely serene, and another person can be worried to death. Both worry and serenity come, not from circumstances, but from the heart.

There may be greater sins than worry or anxiety, but very certainly there is no more disabling sin. "Take no anxious thought for tomorrow" – that is the commandment of Jesus, and it is the way, not only to peace, but also to power.

Christians need to take the view from the balcony: that is to take the larger picture. We are to become part of the solution not part of the problem. We are to be calm and courageous no matter what happens as we know God is with us.

Finally, we are to be a non-anxious presence in our family, our community and our world. What a great gift this will be, to be a non-anxious presence. This is God's call for us, and for all His creation.

Thanks be to God!

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