
Getting to the Heart of Your Worry

by Robert D. Jones

Don't worry, be happy!" That was the advice from a popular song several years ago. But for the person who struggles with worry, such counsel is sadly simplistic, and easier said than done.

Perhaps no single problem plagues people more than worry or anxiety. It may arise suddenly. It may accompany you daily. It saps your sleep, drains your joy, exhausts your energy, ruins your relationships, and aggravates your body ailments. For some people, worry is chronic and crippling. For all of us, worry is one of the most typical, everyday sins.

Yet the good news is this: Worry is a solvable problem. Grace applies. God through His Spirit and Word provides Christians with all they need to fight against anxiety and to overcome worry.

God Gives You Hope to Overcome Worry

So, Christian, what should you do with your worry? How should you handle your anxiety when it arises? Thankfully, the Bible—God's own living Word—speaks powerful answers to this perennial problem.

In Matthew 6:19-34 Jesus addresses worry. Before examining His words, let me offer you some hope. The very fact that

Jesus Himself addresses worry means that there are answers from God for your problem. You are not left with human-centered psychologies for answers to life's problems. The believer in Jesus does not need to depend on man's opinions, theories, and techniques. As a Christian, you have the Bible to teach you how to handle worry. God Himself guarantees help and hope to worriers like you and me.

Furthermore, the fact that in Matthew 6 Jesus is addressing His own followers breeds hope. Why? Because it assures you that even believers in Jesus can and do struggle with worry. Even God's children experience anxiety. God knows that, and He wants to progressively liberate you from it. Our Lord's words overflow with hope.

Worry is Sinful

What does Jesus say about worry? He tells us that it is wrong. He forbids it no fewer than three times in the same passage, "Do not worry" (verses 25, 31, 34). Worry, then, is sin. The apostle Paul repeats this prohibition in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything."

The fact that your worry is sin, however, should not discourage you. It turns the lights on. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners like you and me—to forgive us for our worrying and to help us change our patterns. While God might not reverse the tough situations you worry about, He

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specializes in pardoning, cleansing, and helping the worrying person. Amid difficult circumstances, He wants to change you.

Someone might ask, "Why is worry sinful? After all, it is so common and natural. Everybody does it. Besides, it shows that we're concerned about things in life. Isn't it better to worry a little than to be callous, indifferent, and apathetic to the world around us?"

What, then, is wrong with worry? Why is it sinful? Jesus Christ answers that question in Matthew 6:19-34. He does not merely prohibit worry; He gives you reasons why it is wrong. He exposes the sinful roots of your anxiety with two penetrating pictures.

Worry is Idolatry, and the Solution is Repentance

First, Jesus tells you in verses 19-25 that worry is idolatry. Idolatry means to worship someone or something other than the true and living God. It is giving yourself to some person, goal, ideal, or object other than Jesus. It involves hitching your heart to some false savior and refuge; exalting your personal desires above the Lord; serving some master other than God. Worry expresses idolatry in the heart. Your worry is a sign that in some way you are trusting in yourself, that you are building your life on things or people other than Jesus. Your anxiety is an automatic indicator of a heart that is not fully following the Lord but is temporarily following something else.

In verse 25 Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry...." His "therefore" points us back to the preceding context of verses 19-24. In this passage Jesus shows how idolatry competes with God in three ways.

First, worry expresses that you seek and trust *competing treasures* (verses 19-21). Jesus says, "Store up heavenly treasures rather than earthly, perishable treasures." The things of Christ and His kingdom cannot perish.

So many of your worries involve earthly things—your job, your marriage, your money, your possessions, your health, your children, etc. You focus and fixate on them, you attach your heart to them, and then you live in perpetual worry about when, how, if, or how soon these things will perish or fail. They end up controlling your mind and actions. What you value supremely will rule your life. Why? Because your treasure will control you. "Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Heavenly treasures include every benefit found in Christ, every jewel of the rich inheritance Jesus died to

procure for His people. Ultimately, that highest treasure is God Himself and His Son Jesus. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Gen. 15:1). God says, "I am your treasure." One of the psalms wrestles it out this way, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26). To see and be with God and the Lamb

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Second, worry expresses that you look at life with *competing eyes* (verses 22-23). The good eye lets God's light into the body, while an evil eye results in a dark body. "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" Christ is light. Do you have eyes for Him or for other things?

When you fail to have a good eye—to set your sights on Jesus and His kingdom—you will be filled with the darkness of chronic worry or invaded by acute worries. Your vision will be clouded, temporal, earthly, and limited. No wonder Scripture summons you to "set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace."¹

Third, worry expresses that you serve *competing masters* (verse 24). Slave masters require exclusive allegiance. It is impossible to work at the same time for two different bosses. "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Jesus declares that you cannot serve God and something or someone else, whether it is money (a typical object of worry) or any other god. When you fail to follow the true God, you seek to live for yourself by wor-

¹Helen H. Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," 1922 hymn.

shipping other gods. The things you worry about reveal your idols—pleasing your spouse, legalistic perfectionism, your children, money, revenge, success, and the like.

As Stanley Gale puts it, “Worry is an attempt to overthrow the only God who has creative and redemptive lordship over our lives....Instead of trusting God by submitting and yielding to His good pleasure, the warrior rebels and asserts himself in defense of autonomy, of independence from the God in whom he lives, moves, and has his being.”²

Christian friend, whenever you worry, check your faith. You are trusting in _____? You are looking at _____? You are following _____? That someone or something other than God is the object of your heart idolatry. And worry will certainly result.

No one but the God of Scripture—the true and living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus—is powerful enough, good enough, and wise enough to provide for you and guide you. He is a good master, a faithful God, and a secure refuge, incomparably more trustworthy than the substitutes we seek. While our former master—sin—pays his slaves the wages of death, our new master—God—freely gives His slaves the gifts of holiness and eternal life (Rom. 6:22-23). Repent of your false masters, false gods, and false refuges, and renew your faith in God your Savior.

Worry is Unbelief, and the Solution is Faith

Jesus gives a second way to look at the roots of your worry in verses 25-34. Worry is the fruit of remaining unbelief. He says worriers have “little faith”(6:30). To whom is Jesus talking? Pagans? No, to His followers! He does not say you have “no faith,” but only “little faith.” Therefore, when a Christian worries, the worry stems from “little faith,” from the pockets of remnant unbelief and doubts that reside even within a Christian.

As we saw earlier, Jesus prohibits worry. But that’s not all. He also gives reasons not to worry, and those reasons center on the character and promises of God as your Father. To worry is to deny—in practical ways—God’s power, wisdom, and love for you in your situation. To worry is to forget the full implications of your identity as one of God’s chosen, adopted, and deeply loved children.

Jesus gives you reasons not to worry by feeding your faith. The God who provides for birds and flowers is your Father, and He values you much more than He values them.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your

life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (6:25-30).

If God will provide for plants and animals, will he not much more care for you, dear Christian—you who have been made in His image, bought by His Son’s death and resurrection, and sealed by His Spirit? The birds and flowers were not formed in His image, yet God provides for them. After all, God did not send His Son to take the form of a plant or animal, but to en flesh Himself as one of us. He did not sacrifice His own dear Son to purchase larks and lilies, did He?

In addition, Jesus tells you not to worry because worrying characterizes pagans, not those who belong to, and are known by, the heavenly Father. “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them” (6:31f).

Pagans—idolaters, unbelievers—eagerly seek temporal things. But the believer in Jesus must live differently. Christian, you have a Father in heaven who knows your true needs and will meet them. He provides for His people. Jesus encourages us in the next chapter, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). To worry is to doubt His knowledge, goodness, and might toward you. To believe God’s goodness is to be freed from worry.

Commenting on this passage, Dr. John Piper writes, “Jesus says that the root of anxiety is inadequate faith in our Father’s future grace. As unbelief gets the upper hand in our hearts, one of the effects is anxiety. The root cause of anxiety is a failure to trust all that God has promised to be for us in Jesus.”³ Notice Piper’s astute observation: worry results when our remaining unbe-

²Stanley D. Gale, “Worry Unmasked,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 9:4, 1989, p. 18.

³John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1995), p. 54.

lief, our inadequate faith, gets the upper hand in our hearts. The remedy? Believe Jesus and His gospel promises. Trust all that God has promised to be for us in Jesus.

The antidote to worry, then, is to trust in God. You must replace anxiety with a growing focus on the things of God. Jesus puts it this way: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (6:33). The remedy for

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worry is to seek the Lord, to believe His promises and orient your life around His priorities. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). You must give yourself to Him, confident of His kingdom promises. God guarantees to give you the things you truly need. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Not one of His promises to us has ever failed. He is a very present help in time of need. Let God's kingdom guarantees compel your faith and dispel your worries.

Jesus concludes His message to worriers with a final plea: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (6:34). Worrying cannot improve your future. Instead, it diverts you from your present responsibilities. It drains your energy and saps your vitality. It also makes you miss the present joys and blessings of God's provision.

Conclusion

Christian friend, whenever you worry about anything, or are tempted to do so, know that your worry is a symptom of your remaining idolatry and unbelief. There is someone or something you are living for other than the Lord. There is some truth or promise about God that you are not embracing, and some lies that you are accepting instead.

What should you do? Go talk to the Lord about your worries. Admit that your worrying is sin. Ask Him to help you identify the specific idols and lies that rule you. Confess them to Him. Repent of the various ways you have let the cares of this world control you, the ways you have sought your own agenda rather than Christ's kingdom. Tell God that you are sorry for doubting His promises—the very promises His Son

secured and sealed by His death and resurrection. Ask Him to forgive you and cleanse you of these things.

But don't stop there. Turn back to your Lord to worship Him, and bank on His promises of grace, even in worrisome situations. Fill your mind with the appropriate truths about God that will destroy those idols and lies. Then rise up with fresh faith, clinging to Christ alone, obeying Him, and casting all your anxiety on Him, knowing that "he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Finally, pour your energies freely into *today's* business, today's responsibilities, the troubles of this day that God intends you to address. Worry wastes time. Faith uses time well as a gift of God.

The following self-counseling questions may help you examine your worries in light of God's Word. Then act on the answers as you continue to grow in overcoming worry.

(1) What one or two concerns in your life most often become areas of worry or anxiety?

(2) Worrying is always a symptom of remaining idolatry and unbelief. Identify the specific idols and lies that are ruling you.

(3) What specific truths about God and promises from God do you need to embrace?

(4) Take specific steps to repent of worry, idols, and lies. Embrace God's truth and promises. Ask God to forgive you and cleanse you, based on Jesus' death and resurrection.

(5) Replace those idols and lies with appropriate truths and promises about God; count on them and believe them daily.

(6) Respond to the Lord with appropriate steps of obedience. What is today's task?

As further help, study and pray over passages such as Matthew 6:19-34; Philippians 4:4-9; John 14; 1 Peter 5:6-7; and Psalms 27, 37, 46, 56, 73, 94. Meditate on God and His gospel promises to you in Christ. Repeat the stirring maxim of the late Jack Miller, "Preach the gospel to yourself daily."

You should not try to do this alone. Talk with a Bible-believing pastor, a wise friend, or a biblical counselor who can wisely and lovingly help you to know and apply God's Word to your worrisome situations. Seek to apply these truths with the ongoing help of other believers in your local church.

Dear reader, Jesus Christ can change you from a worrier to a truster-in-God, and He can begin to do so today!