

“Attacking Anxiety”

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Scriptural Foundation: Matthew 6:24-34, NIV

Jesus has been teaching us, in Matthew 6, about the life which pleases God, the life which is joyful, and the life which is worth living and He relates three separate obstacles in a path to practical holiness, or godliness of living. He first talked about religious self-righteousness and hypocrisy; we have a temptation to practice religion so as to be seen before men. Second, He talks about the danger of worldliness; of loving the world and the things which are in the world. That is a huge obstacle to overcome as we desire to live godly in this world. The last obstacle He addresses is the obstacle of worry and of anxiety; that the cares of this world will also rob us of the strength to live godly in Christ Jesus.

Treasures in Heaven (continued)

²⁴ *“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.*

Do Not Worry

²⁵ *“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?”* ²⁶ *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?”* ²⁷ *Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*

²⁸ *“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.”* ²⁹ *Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”* ³⁰ *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?”* ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.”* ³³ *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* ³⁴ *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own”*

We have so much to worry about in our time. The nightly news concern us with stories of terrorists cells within our borders planning their next big attack; stories of evil men walking onto college campuses and into malls with guns to murder and to maim at reckless random; stories of super-bugs which threaten entire populations with disease leading to death; and stories of recession, inflation, and global warming. In addition, we are tempted to worry about personal matters; our health, our children, our marriage, our job, our retirement, our final exams, our community, our country. We torment ourselves with thoughts of, “What if that happens!”

Most acknowledge worry is a negative force pulling us down emotionally, and rightly most consider worry to be unhealthy, for indeed, worry is very unhealthy to the body and to the mind. Soren Kierkegaard commented, “No grand inquisitor has readied us such terrible tortures as anxiety.”

Anxiety can pain us and keep us awake at night, tossing and turning, but in this study, Jesus challenges us to view worry, not as merely being unhealthy, but as being unfaithful to God. Three times in our text the Lord commands us, “Do not worry.” Here Jesus teaches us worry is a sin to battle against with God’s resources. Anxiety is not, first, a mental condition, but it is primarily a spiritual condition, for worry attacks, first and foremost, our spirit, our soul, our attitude toward God, our walk with Him, and our worship of Him. Worry is a wrong which steals God’s transcending peace from our lives and His joy from the heart of the believer which would protect him or her.

Thankfully, Jesus does not wage His finger at us and say, “Do not worry,” but He also opens for us a strategy whereby we can defeat worry and we can attack our anxiety and win against it. There are five strategies Jesus unveils for battling worry and each one is so very important to our lives. The first strategy is to choose the right Master. The

second strategy is to trust in God's sovereign provision. The third strategy is to rejoice in God's loving care. The fourth strategy is to consider the futility of worry. The fifth strategy is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Before we look at each one of these strategies in depth, I want to encourage you: you can will over your fears and your worries. Some of you may be discouraged and you think to yourself your anxieties are controlling my thoughts, my attitudes, and my decisions. They may keep you awake at night and you do not believe you can do anything about them. You wish to be rid of them, but you do not think that is possible; you have tried but you cannot shake worry from your thoughts.

Friend, Jesus never gives us a command without giving us resources to obey those commands. Three times Jesus commands us, "Do not worry," and with each command He gives us grace and if we grab ahold of this grace and apply it to our heart we will win with this battle of unbelief of worry.

I do not want you to think this battle will be easy, however, for that is not true. No battle against any sin is easy. We do not just sit back and say, "Worry, be gone!" and it is gone. No, we have to use the energy of our soul and apply it to biblical truth and grace and then we will find we win the battle, but we must fight if we are to win.

How can we fight? Jesus counsel is sorely needed and let us all profit from it. The first counsel and strategy which Jesus gives is the necessity of choosing the right Master, when He says,

²⁵ *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry..."*

You might underline the first word which appears in the text, "therefore". One Bible study principle which is very important to observe, as you study your Bible day-by-day, is whenever you find the word "therefore" you look to see what it is "there for". There is something preceding it to which it is pointing and to which it is connecting; there is a logical connection to the teaching which precedes it. It causes us to look above the word "therefore" to discover to what this commandment, "Do not worry," is connected. What is the logical grace and truth God has given us so as to strengthen this command and provide for it.

We read Verse 24, which immediately precedes Verse 24,

²⁴ *"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."*

He does not say, "You should not! It is an impossibility to serve both God and money." These two will eventually pull us in opposite directions. Jesus is teaching us there is a connection between the God we choose to serve and worry and anxiety in our life. If we choose to serve earthly things and we love earthly things then worry will grab ahold of our heart and our life. The more we love earthly things the more of a problem we will have with worry, but also, the more we are loyal to the True God of Heaven and the more we love the Lord Jesus, the less problem we will have with worry and the less stronghold anxiety will place in our lives.

There are two reasons, I believe, loving material possessions and the things of this world will make us worry. The first is this: a focus upon material possessions robs us of a clear view of God. It is like frost on the windshield. The more we focus upon the things of this world, whether it is the pleasures or the stuff this world affords us, the less clear we will be able to see the God who loves us, we will fail to see His sovereign power, we will fail to see His wisdom, we will fail to see His glory, and we will fail to see His loving kindness toward us. When that is out of view worry comes forcefully upon us, attacking us as a strong man, and we become absolutely defenseless against it. When we have a love for the things of this world we forget God is our Heavenly Father who cares about us and who loves us. He is our Eternal Shepherd.

The second reason why loving material possessions brings worry into our life is because material possessions are a very weak god. Money is a very weak god. Mammon cannot secure and protect what is most precious to us, so we are going to worry if we have money as our first love and as our first loyalty. If we have the stuff of this world, which is passing away, this god is a fleeting deity which rots and rusts and steals from us. Is it any wonder, when we have this before us, and this becomes the meaning of life to us and it becomes a significant aspect of our existence, we begin to

be anxious and worried about that, because we have lost sight of the True God who is secure and stable and who does not rust, and does not rot, and cannot be away from us. Many loose the battle with worry right here.

As we chart the course of our life we must choose our loyalties and what we love and if we do not choose to love Him who is eternal and to love Him who is all-glorious, and if we do not choose to love Him first and to have Him as our Master and the One who is the leading Principle of our life we will never be able to begin to overcome worry. We will loose the battle before we begin it. Jesus takes us by the hand and says, "Oh, you of little faith. Let me walk with you and let me visit again which master you are serving. And, by the way, this is not a once for all decision which one makes. It is a decision one makes everyday we get up, for the competing gods of this world woo us and speak to us in very pleasant terms." Everyday we will have to choose which god we will serve. Will we serve God? Or, will we serve mammon?

Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China, said these words, "Let us give up our work, our plans, our selves, our lives, our loved ones, our influence, and our all right into God's hand and then, when we have given all over to Him, that is to say, when He is our Master, there will be nothing left for us to be troubled about."

Have you chosen this day whom you will serve, or are you still wavering between two opinions? In Verse 25, Jesus says, "Do not worry." That literally means "stop worrying". "I know worrying has already grabbed ahold of your attention, of your attitudes, of your heart, but stop worrying about your life, what you will eat, what you will drink, about your body and what you will wear, because is not life more important than food?"

Where does our life come from? Does it come from the stuff of this world? If so, that indicates who our master is. If we live in order to acquire more or to enjoy more of the passing things of this world we have to make a decision as to where our first loyalties and our first loves lie. He is not teaching us asceticism here, that it is wrong to enjoy the stuff of this world, He is teaching us about worship. He is saying, "Is not life more than food and the body itself? Where does life come from? Life comes from God Himself, who is the Author of life, and when He is our Master, of course, we understand everything in this physical realm is passing away; even these bodies of ours." The greatest thing in all of life is knowing God and nothing can take us away from Him when we have our eyes set upon Him. We need not worry about these things.

Stop worrying because you know that life is more than this physical realm we see, feel, and touch. Our real life is that which lasts forever. Indeed, God created the body and one day, when these bodies die, He will resurrect these bodies, but we know these bodies, in and of themselves, are not where life is. Our life is found in Christ with God, so we do not live when we have God as the Master of our soul as though the physical is all there is and all consuming.

Jesus is not cold and uncaring as He speaks to us about life in the body. It is not as though He is saying, "So your body is breaking down. I do care about that at all." No, He simply calls us to not perceive of the physical realm as to where life resides.

When my son Alexander was a little boy, on one occasion he had some glands which were swollen and they were so for weeks on end. We took him to the doctor and he was concerned about it and he said, "We will give him some antibiotics and if they don't down we will have to do a biopsy on them." Each day I would go into his room and feel his glands and they would be the same size; it seemed as though they could even be bigger. I tell you I struggled every day with worry and it was in the midst of that trial, before those glands went down, I came across this passage again and God spoke to me though it. He said, "Ritch, is not your son's life more than his body? I have him in my care and in my protection. He is mine." It was then, in recognition, life is more than the body even itself and I found peace.

John Piper writes, "We ought not be anxious about food and clothing because food and clothing cannot provide the great things of life, which are the enjoyment of God, the pursuit of His gracious favor, and the hope of eternity in His presence. We get anxious about food and clothing to the same degree we loose of the great purposes of a God-centered life." That is the reason why it is so important to choose because it is only by choosing God as our Master each day we will keep in view each day these great life purposes.

The second strategy is trust in God's sovereign provision. Jesus is indicating God takes care of the eternal part of our life, will not He also take care of the temporal part? We read,

²⁶ *“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.”*

Jesus is telling us, “Listen to the professors who are outside of your window, Professor Sparrow and Professor Robin. They are some of the best teachers you may ever come to and sit at their feet and listen to what they have to say to you. Every time the robin sings his song, the message sounds out, ‘God feeds me with His hand!’ Listen to his lesson and to his instruction.”

It is interesting Jesus is saying, “God feeds them.” In a scientific age we tend to see only the secondary cause of things. We recognize there are worms in the ground and there are seeds which are planted, germinate, and rise up and these things feed the sparrows and the robins. God created this world with a word from His mouth and He is the One who sustains it. Indeed, He uses the natural laws of this world, but He is actively acting upon creation to sustain this world and to hold it altogether so that the robins and the sparrows are fed. He is the primary provider. He uses the worms in the ground and the seeds which germinate, but nonetheless, Jesus acknowledges God is sovereign and active in feeding the birds.

Outside of the windows of our great room in our home I have set two bird feeders. I love watching the birds. As I look at the birds feeding during the winter and in the spring I see other robins in the back yard picking up bugs and worms out of the ground, I tell you these birds are anything but passive in the process of being fed. They are very active. Sometimes they knock each other around and a bigger bird gets the food first. When Jesus says, “Do not worry,” please do not misunderstand. This is not a call to be idle, irresponsible, passive in our approach to life, and to fail to plan for the future about life. This is a call, in the midst of our activity, we do not consider our activity is what provides for us so we do not fear our activity might be in vain. God wants us to be active.

When we were visiting my in-laws, they provided for our family to be able to go to Hawaii several years ago. We were walking down the street in a hurry to find the restaurant we were going to and there was this guy and it was clear he seemed like he was unemployed and he didn’t care to be employed. He came up to us and he said, “Hey, guys, *mahalo!*” He saw us walking quickly and *mahalo* means “chill out, man, you don’t need to be in a hurry. This is Hawaii. Just relax!” It is fine to relax when we are on vacation, but I think that guy had a little too much *mahalo* in him.

God intends for us to have right ambitions, Godly ambitions, and to be active in this world, but in the midst of our activity we do not become self-centered in our worry, forgetting God is the One who provides and fearing God may somehow fail. Jesus says, “Do not worry. Look at the birds. God feeds them.” In His sovereign might and power, He actively feeds even the smallest of creatures. This is not figurative language. It tells us exactly what God does. A thoughtful consideration of God’s sovereign power stirs up our faith and trust.

Imagine you are employed at a company and you have just heard rumors that company is going to be laying off hundreds of workers. You wonder, as you consider feeding your family, if one of those workers might be you. That company, at that time, is not economically strong enough to maintain its workforce and will have to let some of them go. In that case, from a human stand point, a person would worry because the company is not strong enough to maintain the work force and “I might be the one affected.” God is the CEO of the universe and He is always strong enough to maintain and provide for the workforce. There is no weakness in Him where He lays off workers and says, “Sorry, you are off of the role of my care and my provisions,” not when we know Him.

The Psalmist says, in Psalm 56,

³ When I am afraid, I will trust in you.

Jesus says worry is unbelief in God’s sovereign provision. In Verse 30, He says, “Oh, you of little faith.”

It is like the story of the woman facing knee surgery and she was very nervous about it. She worked for a veterinarian and she asked her boss for advise about her surgery. She knew he had performed many surgeries on animals. He is a Christian man and he said, “Turn your worries into prayers. Trust in God’s sovereign power and provision.” That was his first piece of advice. Then he said, “Get plenty of rest and do not lick your incision.”

Paul exhorts us with this encouragement: Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known to God; and then, when we trust in God's sovereign power through prayer, then the peace of God will protect and guard your hearts and your soul.¹

The third strategy is choose to rejoice in God's loving care. Jesus focus is not only on God's power to provide but also His loving desire to bless His people. In Verse 26, at the end, Jesus asks the question,

²⁶ *"Are you not much more valuable than they?"*

Why are we more valuable than they? We are created in His image and God sets His love upon us. How do we know God sets His love upon us? In Romans 5, Paul wrote,

⁸ ...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

He gave us the ultimate demonstration of His loving concern and then in Romans 8, the Apostle Paul will ask the question,

³² 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?

If God gave the greater, won't He also give the lesser the easier to give? Here it is the reverse logic: if God cares for the lesser will He not also care for that which is more valuable?

I told you about my couple of bird feeders out the windows of my home. Imagine grave, economic times came upon us and I had a choice to buy bird seed for the bird feeder or to feed my children. What choice do you think I would make? It would not even be a question; I would choose to feed my children. When we look out at the birds and we see God provides for them, why is it we are concerned God may not provide for us in our future? It is not a choice, of course God will care for His own because He loves us so.

One poem reads,

Said the robin to the sparrow,
"I should really like to know,
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so."

Said the sparrow to the robin,
"Friend I think that it must be,
That they have no Heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me."²

Worry makes us think and act as though we are orphans and as though we have no Heavenly Father and we are all alone to care for ourselves and scrape our own way by in this world.

One counselor I was talking to years ago would often say to his counselees as they struggled with worry and fear of various kinds, "Repeat after me, 'I am not an orphan.'" He wanted them to proclaim that which is true, because, often times in our thinking, living, and attitudes, we live as though we are orphans. Even though we might not say it verbally, we live as though we have no Heavenly Father who cares for us. When we are worried and anxious, let us take some time to consider the cross of Christ and how much God loves us. Let us worship God and rejoice in His loving kindness over us.

I love a passage in Zephaniah 3, and I have this at the bottom of e-mails I send out,

¹ Philippians 4:6-7

² The Robin and the Sparrow, author unknown

¹⁷ “The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Every time I read those words I think of myself as a father who has had little ones. I would go into the nursery in the home and I would take such great delight in these babies as they lay still and I begin to sing over them. That is what the Heavenly Father says He does for you and for me; He takes such great delight in you and in me. Why? It is not because of our performance, but because of the greatness of His grace and His love and He sings over us.

If a father and a mother sing over a child won't they feed that child and won't they care for that child? Of course, they will, so let us rejoice all the more and as we rejoice in God's loving kindness toward us, it is then worry loses its grip upon our soul.

The fourth strategy is to consider the futility of worry. This is a pragmatic strategy but I believe, nonetheless, Jesus teaches it, so it must be very profound and very important.

²⁷ *“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*

Ian McLaren would say, “What does worry do? It does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but it empties today of its strength.” We live in a day in which people are doing everything to add longevity to their lives; to add days to their lives. For instance, I take a tablespoon full of fish oil everyday straight; no plastic capsule around it, just straight. Then I take a bit of pomegranate juice because I have heard that is supposed to be good for you. I do not know that it is, but somebody told me whom I believe. I exercise and we get medical checkups to make sure some illness isn't a runaway disease before it is too late, and we catch it early. We do all kinds of things, and all of these things are good and proper. We are not to be passive with regards to the care of our bodies, but, friends, by worrying about the longevity of our life we will not ever add a single hour to it. In fact, worry has the opposite effect, doctors tell us. It will actually remove hours from it. Why would we worry about the things of this life if there is nothing good that is accomplished, and in fact, many harmful things take place?

The futility of worry is underscored by the truth that most things we worry about never materialize, like the comedian who said, “Someone asked me one day, ‘Why do you worry so much?’ Then they went on to explain most things I worry about never happen. So, I told him, ‘See how effective it is?’” He missed the point! Just because most of the things we worry about do not happen, it is not pointing to the value of worry; worry does not accomplish that.

Verse 34 teaches us the same idea,

³⁴ *“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”*

What God is teaching us here is that today's grace is sufficient for today, but not for tomorrow. It is like the manna God called the children of Israel to gather up each day. He said, “Rely on Me each day. This manna will not be good for you for tomorrow. You cannot store it up. You cannot gather it up.”³ That is what we do with worry. We want to gather up more grace just by our activity today for tomorrow's troubles. We cannot do that, God says. Each day is enough trouble; the exact, right-size of trouble. God has planned specific-sized bits for the trouble of today. Some days those bites are huge and we have a mouthful. Other days are little crumbs and we do not feel them and we believe it to be a pretty good day. God has designed what sized bite for each day and we do not have enough room to take in tomorrow's bite.

When our children were little they would always want to push more food in their mouth than they could take in at one time. We would tell them to take smaller bites or they would choke. They would start to choke and we would help them out and then say, “See, I told you you were going to choke!” That is what happens with worry. We take more worry upon our lives and we find we are choking because we are not intended to take that big of a bite.

³ Exodus 16:15-26

When I was a student at Moody Bible Institute, I became a nervous wreck in the first semester. I had a strong value upon getting the highest of grades. Suddenly, I was aware I was not completely in control of that; up through high school I felt I could control that. In college, at Moody, there were some classes where I could not control that. I would go into these classes for tests and I would literally be shaken, worried, and full of anxious thoughts. I thought to myself, "Ritch, you have four years of undergraduate and four years of a master's degree ahead of you. You cannot live this way." I talked to a professor about it and he pointed me to this verse, then he said this, "Ritch, do you have enough faith to believe God is strong enough to get you through the next five minutes?" I said, "Yes, I do have that much faith." He said, "That is all the faith God asks you to have. He does not ask you to believe God is strong enough to get you through tomorrow. That is tomorrow and let's set that aside. Do you believe you have enough faith God is big enough to get you through the next five minutes? Let's focus upon that." It was a principle which liberated my soul.

The last strategy is we need to seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness. Verse 33 is the heart and soul of this passage.

³³ *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

God will take care of you. Jesus tells us to fire ourselves with a holy ambition. The word "seek" is present tense and means to "have an unceasing quest". Everyday we get up, all throughout the day, and when we go to bed at night, let us have this unceasing quest for God's Kingdom and for God's righteousness. When we are occupied with the quest for God's Kingdom and God's righteousness we will not have the time to turn our energies over to worry. This is the issue and the last strategy Jesus gives us. We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and have a whole ambition which encompasses our life and which is large enough to sustain our life. Do not have a divided mind; do not be double-minded, but rather, seek first, with priority, emphasis, energy, and zeal the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

What does that mean? First, we must seek to enter into the Kingdom of God and we must seek after the King. I ask you, do you know the King of the Kingdom? The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of life, liberty, joy, glorifying God and worshipping Him, and knowing Him forever and ever.

We are born in another kingdom, a kingdom of this world. If we are to seek first the Kingdom of God we must become citizens of that Kingdom. We cannot seek after a kingdom we are not citizens of and which we are outside of. The way to admission to the Kingdom of God is gracious. God has opened a gate and that gate is Jesus. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved⁴ and you will have access to the Kingdom. The first issue of seeking, first, after the Kingdom of God is to enter the Kingdom of God.

The second issue is, once we have entered the Kingdom of God let us enjoy its privileges to the fullest. Let us spend time rejoicing in this Kingdom. We would not take our family on a vacation to Disneyland, purchase all of the tickets, get there, and then say, "Hey, let's just sit over here on the bench all day." Our family would not be very pleased if we did and we would be a fool to do that. You enter the Kingdom, as you would enter Disneyland, and say, "I want to do everything I can to take the most advantage while I am here."

You have entered the Kingdom of God, so why are so many believers sitting on the bench acting as if there are no joys and pleasures to investigate, discover, and embrace throughout life? Why would we do that? That is foolish!

The last issue is we seek to extend and reflect that Kingdom that our lives would become righteous, a righteousness which is from God through faith in Jesus Christ, and a righteousness which is ours as a birthright and an inheritance. It is a righteousness we must fight for if we are to experience it.

If we are not seeking, first, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then there is no refuge against the monster of anxiety and worry. Sin will rob us of our peace and it will rob us of our intimacy with God and of the power and peace He offers to us in Christ.

⁴ Acts 16:31

Friends, I want you to know you can win this battle. Jesus has given us all of the resources we need in order to win it, so let us, now, trust in the Lord with all of our heart, lean not on our own understanding, and in all our ways acknowledge Him. He will direct and He will provide and He will protect our paths.