

Luke 12:22-34

The Cure for Stress

It has been said that worry is interest we pay on a debt we may never owe. We have all had the experience of worrying ourselves sick over something that didn't happen. Worry is where our mind naturally goes when we are uncertain. We worry because we do not know. We never expect things to go well in an unknown situation. We naturally worry.

As a result, worry has become an industry. Though we are one of the richest and most powerful cultures in human history, ours is a society where worry is diagnosed, analyzed, and medicated to an ever-increasing degree. Every worry has a name. Despite our affluence, or perhaps even because of it, it would be difficult to think of a more anxious society in human history.

And it makes sense. For ours is also a culture that believes in the random vagaries of evolution. Only the fittest survive. There is no ultimate purpose to anything beyond the physical here and now. We are on our own in a cruel and heartless world. Despite all our outward show of bravado, when we look at ourselves, we realize that we are weak and insignificant compared with the powers of nature and forces we cannot possibly control. Of course we worry.

The Context

It is clear from the context of this passage that Jesus was addressing His disciples. This did not necessarily mean only the twelve, but the others who were still on the fence regarding following Jesus wholeheartedly. Jesus had just finished addressing the crowd on the foolishness of storing up treasures for ourselves when we have no control over our future. He had done this by telling a parable about a man who was foolish. That foolish man had thought of no one but himself as he laid aside his wealth for a future he never experienced. The foolish man learned that his life was but a vapor. Thinking he was safe, he really had no control at all.

Jesus then “said to His disciples ‘for this reason I say to you do not be anxious’” (v. 22). He knew those to whom He spoke. Having just admonished them on the transience of human life, it would only be natural for His disciples to begin to worry. So Jesus, ever the loving teacher, told them “do not be anxious” (v. 22). He knew His disciples must have been thinking that if they set aside their personal needs to store up treasure in heaven, how would they ever get along in this world. Consequently, Jesus reminded them that their loving Heavenly Father would attend to both their physical and spiritual needs. There was literally nothing for them to worry about.

This was not a new teaching. It was reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, “¹⁹do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). It serves us as a reminder that Jesus spoke frequently about the things that mattered most.

Get the Right Perspective

Jesus said that His disciples need not be anxious about earthly things. He told them, “do not worry about your life, as to what you will eat; nor for your body, as to what you will put on (v. 22). The exhortation not to worry was sensible for two reasons. First, the disciples could place their trust in their Heavenly Father Who loved and cared for them. Secondly, they knew that “life is more than food, and the body more than clothing” (v. 23). In other words, the disciples knew that this world was not all there was, and that this world was not what was most important. Jesus wanted them to have the correct perspective.

Interestingly, this was spoken to the disciples, because if those in the crowd were not believers, it made sense that they would worry. Their world was the random work of nature. In fact, they ought indeed to worry. This was especially true in the ancient world where basic human needs were often difficult to come by. Food and clothing were not guaranteed. People starved. People died of exposure. There were very few safety nets provided by governments or society to help those who had lost everything due to economic stress, war, disease, or general misfortune.

But the disciples were not of this world. Applying this to ourselves, we must remember that we have promises that unbelievers do not have. We can “cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). We know that “God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). With promises like that, why should believers worry?

This did not mean that people were called to an easy life. Indeed Jesus had told His disciples that, “²³if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). The correct perspective is not a guarantee that we will have everything we want; but it does give us confidence that we will have everything we need to fulfill God’s plan for our lives.

And having the right perspective is not just a matter of how we view God. It also pertains to our understanding of how God views us. Jesus asked His disciples to “consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!” (v. 24).

Jesus chose an excellent example. The area around ancient Israel was filled with birds. Migratory birds from the Mediterranean, desert birds - birds were everywhere. And as plentiful as any were the ravens (or crows). These birds were nasty scavengers who fed off the dead carcasses in the desert. They were considered unclean according to Mosaic Law, “¹³these, moreover, you shall detest among the birds; they are abhorrent, not to be eaten: the eagle and the vulture and the buzzard, ¹⁴and the kite and the falcon in its kind, ¹⁵every raven in its kind” (Leviticus 11:13-15).

As scavengers they neither planted nor harvested. Neither did they store up food for later. They simply survived off of dead animals and the refuse that had been thrown away. Nevertheless, God provided for them. They fit into the food chain of God’s great plan. And if God’s plan provided for the sustenance of unclean scavengers, how much more so us! As Jesus rhetorically emphasized, “how much more valuable you are than the birds!” (v. 24). We must understand that worry is inconsistent with our right understanding of us as the crown of God’s creation. We must get the right perspective.

Get the Right Promise

We work hard to take care of ourselves. And we should. To neglect our health is poor stewardship. Getting proper exercise and developing healthy eating habits are important to our physical and, therefore, mental and spiritual well-being. Yet, even here, some well-meaning people can err on the side of the extreme. To focus on the physical to the detriment of the spiritual is unwise and carries with it the potential for eternally significant consequences. As Paul wrote, “for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (Philippians 4:8). We should take care of ourselves but, like the rich fool, ultimately we have no control over when we will die. It is the same thing with worry. Worrying about something does not change the circumstances. It does not improve the situation. It only adds to the pressure. Ultimately, worry is useless.

Jesus told His disciples this when He asked them “which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life’s span?” (v. 26). Again the question was rhetorical. The word “life-span” could mean either time or dimension. Thus Zacchaeus “was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature” (Luke 19:3) and Sarah who, “received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11) are both characterized by the same word. In this case time was probably intended, since adding a few years to a life span of ninety or so is a “very little thing” (v. 26) but adding 18 inches to one’s height would be very significant.

In either case, Jesus’ point was clear. “If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?” (v. 26). Worry rather decreases than increases life-span. It is detrimental to health and, therefore counter-productive. And it simply has no effect. Continuing with the same theme, Jesus challenged His disciples to “consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these” (v. 27).

The word for lily can mean any kind of flower; it is not specific. But any flower simply grows. It is passive. It puts down roots wherever the seed lands and is at the mercy of birds, insects and the weather. As we well know, flowers burst into bloom in the spring, but then disappear quickly with the summer heat. They simply wither and die. In the ancient world they were burned for fuel. Flowers are beautiful things, but nobody would want to be a flower.

Then, Jesus employed a common Jewish construct of arguing from the lesser to the greater. “But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you?” (v. 28). If God took care of the grass which lived such a short time, surely He would take care of His children who live much longer. But it is also an argument from the greater to the less. If God gives the flowers such beautiful adornment, surely He will give His children their basic clothing.

To worry was to demonstrate a lack of faith. Jesus rebuked His disciples by calling them “men of little faith!” (v. 28). They showed a lack of belief in God’s omniscience, since it meant the disciples did not believe God knew their needs. They also showed a lack of faith in God’s wisdom to meet their needs, ability to provide for them, and sovereign plan. This was weak faith indeed. Therefore Jesus concluded,

“do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying” (v.29). Worry is inconsistent with our position as believers.

The disciples had struggled with this before. Remember when they crossed the Sea of Galilee during a storm and, “²⁴they came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. ²⁵And He said to them, “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:24-25). And such weak faith has its consequences, “⁶but he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6-8).

We must trust the promises of our God. Then we will have no need to worry, because we can know He will provide for us to complete His perfect will for our lives.

Get the Right Paternity

The disciples must be different from those in the world. Speaking of earthly things, Jesus said “all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek” (v. 30). And so they must, for in their minds they must provide for themselves. UNot so the disciples. They did not need to worry because their “Father knows that you need these things” (v. 30). The disciples needed to remember that God knew what we needed. And that knowledge ought to make them content.

There are great privileges to being a child of God. The disciples were coming to understand that “God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). But there are also great responsibilities. God has set a high standard for His saints. The disciples must first “seek His kingdom” (v.31). They ought not to live as if they were only fleshly beings. They had a spiritual nature as well as a physical one. They had a God to meet and a judgment to await.

The wording means to seek eagerly and diligently. It is not a casual looking about in case one’s eye happens to notice something. It is passionate. It is purposeful. There is intensity in this. And the disciples were assured that the kingdom of God was the only kingdom worth working for, All other kingdoms will pass away, from the great nations and powers of the world to their own little kingdoms that they thought so highly of. Seeking God’s kingdom ought to be the response of a child of God, “¹therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).

The disciples had the promise that if they put the kingdom of God first, then “these things will be added to you” (v. 31). What things? Food and clothing, to be sure, but so much more as a child of God.

The truth of Scripture promises that “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Such faith was familiar to the disciples. The psalmist had written long ago that,

“For the Lord God is a sun and shield;

The Lord gives grace and glory;

No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11)

⁸O taste and see that the Lord is good;
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!
⁹O fear the Lord, you His saints;
For to those who fear Him there is no want.
¹⁰The young lions do lack and suffer hunger;
But they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing” (Psalm 34:8-10)

It was a matter of trust.

¹Do not fret because of evildoers,
Be not envious toward wrongdoers.
²For they will wither quickly like the grass
And fade like the green herb.
³Trust in the Lord and do good;
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
⁴Delight yourself in the Lord;
And He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:1-4).

Perhaps softening His tone Jesus continued, “do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (v. 32). This was a unique address in Scripture. It was a term of endearment. It was paternal. Jesus was reassuring His disciples not only that God would take care of them, but that He would do so gladly. The word expresses delight - such as one would expect of a Father in His child. This would be an encouragement to the disciples. Though they might only be beginning to realize it, they soon would discover that they truly were a “little flock.” We, too, ought to keep in mind that we are a little flock. We will always be outnumbered. The world will always be against us. “For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:14).

Having a loving Heavenly Father makes it possible not to worry. God is very generous. The disciples were His “children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). They would come to know that if “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). The disciples ought not to worry because they had the right paternity.

But they had a part to play in this. The disciples were told they must seek the kingdom. Yet they were also informed the kingdom of God was a gift. Was that inconsistent or contradictory? Was Jesus teaching a works-based doctrine of salvation? Not at all. The disciples were to work diligently in the power of the Holy Spirit, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

Jesus concluded His discourse with a seemingly impossible command to follow. “Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys” (v. 33). That was an extraordinary request. To begin with, the disciples did not have much. Perhaps Peter and John had some money left over from their fishing business, and surely Matthew had put some by from his days as a tax collector, but there is no reason to

think that the disciples were in any way wealthy. Why these commands to ‘sell’ and ‘give’? Because by doing so, the disciples would ‘make.’

We must remember that the context in which Jesus was saying this was the parable of the rich fool. That is the spirit Jesus was exhorting against. We can think of passages such as 2 Corinthians 8:1-9) as a way of elaborating on this doctrine.

“¹Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ²that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, ⁴begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, ⁵and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. ⁶So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. ⁷But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. ⁸I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

The disciples, and us, ought to emulate God in His generosity. The reason was simple. Jesus said that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (v. 34). We cannot be in two places at once. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). Therefore we must ask ourselves, “what do we love the most?” That is a true measure of our spiritual maturity.

Take Aways

Let us think of the treasure in heaven, stored up for us who are faithful. Let us live for that and believe that God knows what is best for us along our way there. Let us consider worry a violation of that trust in our loving and sovereign heavenly Father.