

Anxious and Distracted

Matthew 6:25-34 ²⁵ "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? ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ 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? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

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These last ten verses in the sixth chapter of Matthew are rather difficult to comprehend and apply to our lives. To begin with, telling people to not be anxious is kind of like telling someone not to think about an elephant. The word translated as "anxious" here can mean apprehensive, unduly concerned, or distracted. In today's terms, we might translate this as "Don't obsess about things!"

Notice that the examples Jesus lists are some pretty basic necessities – things like food and clothing. If we aren't supposed to be apprehensive or anxious about such basic needs, then it's logical to assume that this teaching on anxiety also includes lots of other issues. In fact, the command to "fear not," the admonition "do not be afraid," may well be the most often repeated command in scripture – and the one least obeyed!

It's easy to understand why we're bewildered by this passage these days. How could Jesus say this to us today? Doesn't he know that many national economies depend on massive spending on stuff that people don't really have to have? We're a nation that expects instant gratification - and advertising creates an appetite for shiny things we don't need. It's such a rat race to keep up, much less be ahead, in the toy race. As soon as you get the latest i-pad, i-pod, or i-phone, Steve Jobs will introduce a newer model that is faster, prettier, smaller, and more powerful. Two years after I bought my car, I was disappointed that the sound system in it didn't have a port for an i-pod. There's the bumper sticker that reads, "The one with the most toys, wins." Wins what, for pity's sake? You might win the envy of your neighbors who have also bought into the rat race. Now there's a laudable goal – make your neighbors feel like losers.

Today's passage follows right after the statement that we can't serve two masters and our text for today begins with the word, therefore." The point here is to replace one master with another. Money is a cruel master and the path of Christ is a lighter load, a less anxious way of living, a more peaceful existence.

God knows what we need, the text says. We're told to trust in God. Actually, we put "In God we trust" on our money, both the paper bills and the coins. The truth is, as a society we really trust our economic power and our military might. It's rather ironic: we have so much faith and trust in what money will do for us, but on the money itself we print "In God we trust". We could call that false advertising, but that would actually be understating the offense.

It's possible to misunderstand and distort what Jesus has said here. The old King James Version says "Take no thought for the morrow." Over the past 400 years English has changed with time, and we might hear that now as, "Don't even think about tomorrow." It can sound like working is a sign of lack of trust in God, and we can rationalize that laziness is a virtue, a sign that we count

on God to provide for us. However, this passage is not encouraging us to not work. That would be a distortion! The author of the second letter to the Thessalonians clearly says, “we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12)

In this lovely part of the Sermon on the Mount about birds and flowers, we come closer to understanding the point that Jesus makes if we read this as poetry, not prose, as figures of speech, not the language of contracts. Jesus said, “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” This isn’t a contract. Think about it. The apostle Paul was certainly a great example of someone who worked hard for the kingdom of God and who was dedicated to living a righteous life. Paul had great confidence in God, but he often went hungry and without shelter. (2 Cor. 11:27) He wrote, “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty - and of being in need.” “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” (Philippians 4:11-13 NRS) This isn’t just a matter of being resigned to a bad situation. Paul describes it in more positive terms than that. Echoing Christ’s teaching about worry, Paul writes, “⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phi 4:6-7 NRS) Paul is a glowing example of how we can be freed from compulsive anxiety about luxuries – we don’t even need to worry about the basics – food & clothing. It isn’t that food and clothing should never cross our minds. We should work, think, and plan for our needs, but we aren’t to obsess, stress out, be preoccupied, or apprehensive about them. Our anxiety can be a denial of the love and faithfulness of God, and that worry and apprehension can shackle and bind us to being preoccupied with the things of earth. Jesus said, the Gentiles do that sort of thing. In other words, it’s pagan!

We all know that droughts, lightning, and floods cut short the lives of birds and flowers – and even humans who trust in God. This paragraph in Matthew isn’t a warranty policy. Again, we should read this as poetry, not prose. Jesus draws our attention away from frantic concern for the basic necessities to a calmer place where we’re aware of God’s bountiful care. And bountiful it is! At this time of year we’re surrounded with an explosion of spring colors – from tulips to tulip trees, from daffodils to dogwoods. It won’t be long until we’ll be looking forward to the first homegrown tomato and mimosa trees covered with butterflies. God’s creation provides great beauty, wonderful food, grand vistas, cheerful bird songs, and warm days at the beach. There is so much beauty, that it is obvious that God loves beauty. In lyrical phrases, Jesus raves about the glory of the lilies of the field.

One sign of God’s love for us is that we have all of this to enjoy! We’re deeply loved and highly valued by God. As wonderful and graceful as the birds are, as stunningly beautiful as flowers are, God cares even more for us. We are a little lower than angels. We’re made in God’s image as creatures with capabilities for deep thought, careful reasoning, exciting creativity, and a passion for living. “There is nothing in this world that can take away what God provides – dignity, a sense of worth, the confidence of being treasured in the heart of God. Whatever tomorrow brings, it will also bring God with it”¹

In this passage, Jesus says that we are to strive first for the kingdom of God and for his righteousness. This is a call to revise our priorities - and to align our priorities with God’s. It isn’t just about personal morality. If God cares so much about all those birds flying overhead and all of the flowers that pop up out of the ground, then those need to be our concerns, as well. The ecology is a theological issue. We need to be careful how we treat that which is so valuable to God. We are stewards of this big blue marble. We may use, but not use up. When we foul rivers, plunder resources, and decimate plant and animal life, we disrespect God’s creation and thumb our nose at God. We’re like spoiled brats who tear up handmade toys given to them by loving grandparents.

God cares deeply about all of creation – especially people! As Jesus taught, he was surrounded by people who were struggling. They were poor. The Roman occupation was sucking the very life out of their country. Many who had owned small farms had been taxed so heavily that they lost their land. Land was diverted from growing food for Palestine to crops that could be shipped to Rome to meet the demands of the Imperial City. Fish caught in Galilee were mostly salted and sent to Rome. Most of those to whom Jesus was speaking were the involuntary poor, those dependent on uncertain wages as day laborers. The passage assures the poor that in God’s sight they are of more value than birds and lilies, as valuable as those are to God. Jesus was speaking to people who were in economic and political distress. Think of people in desperately poor places in Latin America, or Africa, or the part of town where you don’t drive. Many millions of people in the world try to live on two dollars a day.

Notice that Jesus mentions food, drink, clothing – the same things that he says we will be judged on when he said, ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, (Mat 25:35-36 NRS) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wasn’t just telling the poor that God cared about them. He was also pointing that out to the more affluent. God cares about people. You should, too. Align your priorities with God’s priorities. Find ways of copying God’s concern and care for the poor.

“Jesus cares so passionately about the poor [that] he identifies himself more closely with them than he ever does with the church, the sacraments, the Bible, or whatever else we Christians tend to equate with Jesus. So when the poor in our community or around the world cry out to God for mercy, the answer to their prayer ought to be us.”²

A boy who was hungry and didn’t have any shoes was asked by a someone who believed that poverty was a sign of God’s displeasure, “If God loved you, wouldn’t he send you food and shoes?” The boy replied, “God told someone, but they forgot.” God has told us. Jesus has taught us. We must pray that we don’t forget! We tend to pray for the poor and suffering, but forget to pray that we may find a way to be of service. “God’s providence is not in baskets lowered from the sky, but through the hands and hearts of those who love him.” Amen.

(2Th 3:7-12 NRS) ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹ This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2Cor. 11:27 NRS) ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

(Philippians 4:11-13 NRS) ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, WBC (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 76

² Jason Byassee, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox. 2010) p 406