

Worry: Thief or Tutor

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:33-34)

People often crucify themselves between two thieves: the regrets of yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. A nationally syndicated columnist was asked if there was a common issue among the thousands of requests for advice she received each month. Without a moment's hesitation, she replied that worry and anxiety soared above all others. People were afraid of losing their health, wealth, and loved ones. They were afraid of personal tragedies, of death, and even of the vagaries of life itself.

The term “worry” originates from an Anglo-Saxon word that means to strangle or choke. How well named the emotion is has been demonstrated repeatedly in people who have lost their effectiveness because of the stultifying effects of anxiety and apprehension. The word “worry” quoted in the text above literally means “to be drawn in different directions.” Worry pulls us apart. It sweeps down on us like a thief robbing us of our energy, our enthusiasm, our time, our sleep, and of our companionship with those we love.

In the Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus prohibits worry on three grounds:

- Because it is symptomatic of not putting first things first.
- Because it is a mark of little faith.
- Because it is useless.

First, worry indicates failure to prioritize things correctly. Matthew 6 deals with singular mastery. The Lord Jesus is requiring his disciples to choose their master—God or money, Father or gain, treasures in eternity or the trinkets of time (6:19-24). Attempts at divided loyalty betray an earth-bound perspective that amounts to idolatry. When that idolatry manifests itself in covetous acquisitiveness, it is easily identified. It is more sobering to realize that it can be manifested in our anxiety as well. To claim that I have one Master, a sovereign, all-sufficient, loving Father, and to worry like a wart over life's details and provision, is to miss something. Either my God is impotent or my heart-treasures earth-bound.

Second, worry is a mark of little faith. In Matthew 6:28-29, Jesus is giving “little-faiths” a practical lesson in observation. To worry to the point of distraction about life's provisions is to fail to believe that God is God and that he will provide what we need. The Lord points to God's faithful care of creatures and creation that are far less important than those created in his image. The birds of the air obey the principle that is within them and the lilies blossom where they are planted. When we obey the life God has given us, he will look after the other things that we need.

Third, worry is useless. It does nothing to resolve the issues that are pressing on us. In addition, the greater percentage of things we worry about never happen. There is an account of a distinguished Anglican bishop who, in his later years, developed a significant fear of paralysis. One evening while he sat at the head table of a denominational banquet, his fellow diners overheard him muttering to himself that his great fear had finally materialized. He could not feel anything in his left leg. The tale concludes when a distinguished elderly woman sitting next to him leaned over and whispered in his ear: “Your Grace, you'll be pleased to know that it is my thigh you're pinching.” Most of our psychic energy goes for nought. Jesus agrees—What a waste!

A woman of advanced age was asked about the secret to her long life. Her reply: “When I work, I work hard. When I sit, I sit easy. And when I worry, I go to sleep.” I wish I were like her. However, I am one

of the “little-faiths” that Jesus addresses in Matthew 6:25-34. Legend are those who share my dilemma. We carry what we were never meant to carry, and we carry it much too far. Indeed, to instruct us not to worry causes us to worry about whether we are worried! A common human emotion becomes the arena where spiritual truth unfolds. Worry becomes an environment pregnant with possibility for teaching single-minded, believing devotion. Worry can be a thief or a tutor—

- It can rob us of our sleep or teach us of our God.
- It can ruin our physical health or invigorate our faith.
- It can destroy our effectiveness or be the occasion for developing devotion foundational to pleasing Father.

The choice is ours. By the grace of God and the empowerment of the Spirit, let us make the right one.