

## ***The Remedy for Worry***

Wouldn't it be great if you knew you'd never need to worry again? Our New Testament reading is in **Luke 12**, where Jesus teaches the remedy for worry. Follow as I read verses **22-34**.

*<sup>22</sup> He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup> For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. <sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>26</sup> If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? <sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! <sup>29</sup> And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. <sup>30</sup> For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup> Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

*<sup>32</sup> "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Cathleen Henning Fenton, writing about panic disorder, says, "In our busy world, it's not unusual to feel worried at times. You may worry about your family, your job, your health and other personal issues. You may worry about friends and your community. And you may worry about issues facing the entire world. Sometimes, though, worry becomes a problem. Worry might disrupt your daily routine, hampering your ability to focus at work, for example, or keeping you from falling asleep at night. More seriously, you might find yourself unable to do anything about worry, until it gets to the point where worry controls your life." And then she describes the symptoms of undue anxiety that becomes panic disorder and urges readers to seek the help of a health professional.

To worry means to be unsettled about something, to be "up in the air," like a ship tossed by the waves. We all know what it is to worry, perhaps tossing in our beds during sleepless nights, as we're unsettled by anxious thoughts of what might happen to ourselves, our families, possessions, relationships, careers and future. From early childhood we're taught to worry about what we put in our mouths; and our parents, fearing we may never have the initiative we need to succeed in life, taught us we'd better start worrying about finding a summer job! As if there weren't enough to worry about in our personal lives and with our

children or grandchildren, we can find plenty to worry about in this information age. If we watch too much television news, we begin to worry about our health, whether we are eating the wrong foods, taking the wrong medications, or are being poisoned by the atmosphere. We certainly can find much to worry us over the economy, wars, famine and pandemics of all kinds.

Jesus doesn't just suggest or counsel trust in the Father, but uses the imperative, commanding us to not worry, just as he often commanded his disciples and those in trouble to stop being afraid (Matthew 10:28; Mark 5:36; John 14:27, etc.). We're to trust in the sovereign power and faithfulness of God, who has promised to provide for the needs of his children. This isn't to say there won't be trials, storms and tragedies in life. But Jesus says we're to not be afraid, but to trust in God's power, faithfulness and love in the midst of life's storms and our needs.

I suppose that, because we are fragile and mortal creatures, we can't help the initial reaction of fear and worry. Yet, because God is perfect love, power and wisdom, our ongoing worry is disobedience to his command, and is a needless exercise in futility. Worry is not only futile, but is also destructive. Jesus asks: "*And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?*" (25). In fact, the opposite is more likely. Constant worry can take years off our mortal life and make our life and work less effective.

Jesus uses the "how much more argument" (as in Luke 11:13) to underscore our value to God. The Father provides for the ravens, "scavenger birds of the lowest rank." How much more will he not provide for us, for whom he gave his Son? (Romans 8:32). We're to affirm our value in the eyes of the heavenly Father, who loves us, more than we could ever love our own children (Luke 11:11-13). He sees us as more beautiful than the flowers that exceed the lavish clothing of Solomon.

Jesus compares God's provision for us with his provision for the birds. All that ravens can do is scavenge for themselves and their little ones. They depend on what God provides, but they're also always busy. (I read or heard somewhere that birds eat several times the equivalent of their weight each day!) And we're also to be busy, as Paul says, working with our hands, so we we'll have enough for ourselves and for those in need (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).

Jesus knows that we'll naturally set our hearts on and seek after what is of value to us: "*And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying.*" (29). These are the concerns that are anxiously pursued by the pagan, unbelieving world (30). Jesus assures us that the Father knows that we need these things. He's not oblivious to our needs, but rather cares about us and will meet our needs. And the good news is that we don't have to go grasping, but we can accept God's provisions from his loving hand.

When our children were very small we gave them little glass piggy banks, where they could store their pennies and cash them in for something they eventually might want to buy. There was a slot at the top where pennies were deposited into the little bank and an opening at the bottom that was covered by a cap that was to be removed only when the bank was full of pennies. One day our son, Kyle, decided to “rob” his bank prematurely, and the opening at the bottom was just large enough for him to slip his hand through and grab a handful of pennies. He came crying to his mother, saying his hand was stuck in the bank. Because his fist was tightly holding the pennies, he couldn’t pull his hand out of the glass bank. Nancy eventually persuaded him to let go of the pennies so that his hand could slip back out of the jar, then he could simply let the pennies fall through the hole.

Much of our worry and distress would be resolved if we learned to let go of our grip on things and let lose of all that causes us worry and stress. Then the Father will let his blessings fall to our empty, trusting hands. And then we’re free to seek after the true and lasting blessings of the kingdom. Jesus reminds us that the Father has been pleased to give us the kingdom. To be under the reign of God and safely in the fold of salvation is a free gift of grace. It’s not a cheap gift, having cost the life, suffering and death of the Son of God (John 3:16; 1 Peter 1:18-19). But it’s free. We can never earn or deserve this gift in any way. All we can do is acknowledge our desperate need and humbly accept it (Ephesians 2:1-9). And to be in the kingdom means we have access to God’s riches.

If we focused more on the reality and the riches of the kingdom of God we’d be more aware of how we’re living beneath our means. We tend to live more like paupers than kings. In my old age I realize more than ever that my spiritual graces are not keeping pace with my birthdays. I recall a dinner conversation with a godly seminary professor, who mentored hundreds of students and pastors each year. He shared with me about 15 years ago when he was approaching his 80’s that his number one prayer was to be sweet and godly in his old age. No amount of ministerial success in church life could ever compensate for a failure to be godly in character and conduct. This is the gift of the kingdom that Jesus says the Father is pleased to give us—not just our getting through the gates of heaven, but the kingdom blessing of God’s righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

When our focus is on the kingdom of God and pursuing his righteousness, we’re given the grace of contentment. A lot of our worry would diminish if we were content with what we already have, as Paul told young Timothy (1Tim. 6:6-10). Contentment belongs to those who follow Jesus and take on his kingdom agenda. In the context of following Jesus, we aren’t in the habit of bringing him a “grocery list” of personal needs, with a few extra wishes thrown in. Rather, the more we seek Jesus and follow his agenda, the more we ask for those things that will make us more like him and that will advance the cause of his kingdom.

Jesus calls us to overcome worry by investing in kingdom causes: “*Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*”<sup>34</sup> *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” (33-34). The only truly safe place for even our material and financial investments is God’s kingdom.

I decided many years ago, (even before asking my financial advisor to move my investments into lower risk instruments) that the safest investment is giving to the church, and other kingdom causes. I still need to grow in faith and sacrificial giving far beyond the tithe, but I’ve seen God honor and bless my giving, as I’ve sought to obey him in this area of my life. It’s been our safest investment of all, one that cannot be taken from me.

I’m convinced also that Jesus’ promise to supply our needs, like food, clothing and shelter, is essentially connected with our willingness of us, his blessed children, to be generous and caring toward the needy. We’d worry a lot less about our own needs if we invested more in giving to and caring for the needy. God delights in providing for his children who are a channel of blessing to those in need (2 Corinthians 9:6-12).

*The Message* paraphrase says, “Get yourselves a bank that can’t go bankrupt, a bank in heaven far from bankrobbers, safe from embezzlers, a bank you can bank on. It’s obvious, isn’t it? The place where your treasure is, that’s the place you will most want to be, and end up being.”

An African American preacher, Immanuel Scott, described how that his grandson would often visit him in his study in the church where he was pastor. Sometimes they would converse, but often the grandson would just sit contentedly occupying himself until his grandfather was finished with his work.

One day the grandson asked his father if he would buy him a pair of basketball shoes, which at the time were the rage. These rather expensive shoes were named after the most famous basketball player of the time, Michael Jordan, and the shoes were called “*Air Jordans*.” Pastor Scott gladly took his grandson shopping for these shoes. When they returned home, Scott’s daughter, the boy’s mother, was displeased by the extravagance. “Daddy, why did you buy him those expensive shoes? Cheaper shoes would have worked just as well for him.” The indulgent pastor/father/grandfather replied, “I was glad to give him something he wanted because of all the hours he spent with me and didn’t ask for a thing.”

I believe that’s the way the Father is with us. If our hearts are content to be in his presence, if we learn to delight in him, then he delights to take care of our needs and perhaps even throw in a little extra, a little “extravagance,” which may not be material but will be evidence that God is able to exceed all our expectations

(Ephesians 3:20-21). When we learn to focus on and find fellowship with God, there's a bit of stress relief. When we're more focused on God and on the needs of others than on our circumstances, we discover the true riches of God—joy, peace and contentment.

We'd likely worry a lot less if we spent more of our time, energy and resources on the work of the kingdom, trusting that God will repay us and also delights to enrich us, if not always material, at least in the ways that count.