

“Do Not Worry”
Luke 12: 22 – 34
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In 1988 Bobby McFerrin had a popular hit single entitled, “Don't Worry, Be Happy.” The first verse went like this:

“Here is a little song I wrote
You might want to sing it note for note – Don't worry be happy

In every life we have some trouble
When you worry you make it double – Don't worry, be happy.....”

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

That question is as timely today as when Jesus posed it 2,000 years ago. ***Does worrying do us any good?***

It would be good to know the answer to that question, because, Lord knows, we've put ***huge*** amounts of time and energy into worrying about all sorts of things that ***might*** happen, and most of those things never really do happen.

We worry about our kids, we worry about our parents, our jobs, worry about whether we will get into the college of our choice, our health, your name it we worry about it.

I guess it is possibly that there are situations where worry can actually add years to your life:

A man was running down the hall of the hospital just before his operation. A security guard stopped him before he could leave the hospital and asked, “What's the matter?”

The man said, “I heard the nurse say, ‘It's a very simple operation, don't worry, I'm sure it will be all right.’”

“She was just trying to comfort you,” said the security guard. “What’s so frightening about that?”

“She wasn’t talking to me,” exclaimed the man. “She was talking to my surgeon!”

Jesus begins with a question of why one would worry about life, as defined by what you will eat, and what you will wear. Life is greater than food, and the body is greater than clothes (v. 23). Jesus’ words are challenging us to re-evaluate our lives by calling us to serve a different master: not material goods and money, but God.

These two comparisons are followed by a more extensive assessment of the “birds of the air,” who do not lack food, though they do not sow, reap, harvest or store provisions (v.24).

The point of the comparison is simple: If God feeds these birds, then God will feed “you.”

Jesus continues:

“Who of you by worrying can add to a single hour to his or her life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?”
(v.25)

Don’t worry – instead trust God.

Jesus pointed to the birds that do not sow or reap and they are fed by the heavenly Father. He pointed to the flowers that do not toil or spin but are clothed in beauty by the heavenly Father.

It’s important for us to understand that Jesus’ words were directed to people who *did* have to sow, to reap, to toil and to spin, and he wasn’t telling them to stop doing those tasks; he simply wanted them to understand that their lives

were a lot more than the sum of their sowing, reaping, and toiling; life is a lot more than what is contained on your resume, your college application or the length of your FaceBook profile.

Further, Jesus tied the call to not worry to the kingdom of God:

“But seek (strive for) his kingdom (his righteousness), and all these things will be given to you as well.” (v.31)

That’s a significant linkage because God’s kingdom is the ultimate reason for optimism and hope. The very meaning of the kingdom is that ***God and those who stand with him win***. In the end, good triumphs over evil. If you’re a citizen of God’s kingdom it’s still possible that you might be pessimistic about human activity in the short term, but you’ve got every reason to be optimistic about God’s activity in the long term.

In fact, on another occasion, Jesus made that very point: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV). And what does “take heart!” mean other than “be optimistic!”? The KJV reads “be of good cheer.”

So by bringing the kingdom of God into the discussion, Jesus reminds us that in the long haul, we who follow him have nothing to worry about.

We don’t??

Let’s look at this a little more closely. Don’t we have some objections that make it hard for us to go along with Jesus on this?

Objection: *The things most of us worry about are not long-term issues anyway.*

Most of us don’t, for example, live our days in anxiety over how global warming will affect us. We seldom even fret about how or when the world will end.

No, most of our concerns – our worries – are over shorter-term issues like:

- “Will I get a good report from the doctor?” or
- “Will my kids stay out of trouble?” or
- “Am I being a good parent?” or
- “How will I be able to pay my bills if I lose my job?”
- “Will I ever sell my house?”

And while many of us are not pessimists by inclination, we can be stressed out by the possibility that our worries will come true.

Objection: *Normal anxiety, unavoidable worry that comes to almost everybody, is a good thing.*

If everyone feels “normal anxiety” from time to time, then surely we should not feel guilty about it. Further, normal worry causes us to take preventative measures against potential problems and even energizes us to make some significant and constructive changes in the way we live. It’s also natural to feel our vulnerability to the forces of nature, to sickness and to death, and we ought not to feel guilty about that either.

Objection: *Jesus is SO logical in this passage; a little too logical.*

“Since you trust God that all things will ultimately work out for the good, and since you trust that he cares for you even more than he cares for birds and flowers, you therefore should not worry about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear.”

Yeah, right. Unfortunately, logic doesn’t always rule.

We aren’t wired that way. We cannot neatly compartmentalize anxiety and then talk ourselves out of it. Some worry tends to occur despite logical reasoning, for it’s based more in our emotions than in our thinking. We hear ourselves saying:

- “*This* may not work out,”

- “*That* could fall short,”
- “*So and so* may slip up,”
- “I may have not anticipated every contingency,”
- “Whatever can go wrong probably will.”

Our minds keep processing those thoughts over and over, building up dread and leaving us uneasy.

So we’ve got objections to being told not to worry.

But there’s this:

What all of these objections really tell us is that we have missed the heart of what Jesus is talking about in this passage. This was not his dissertation on worry.

He’s not Dr. Phil giving us a prescription for how to avoid anxiety. Jesus’ main point is this:

“Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” *Strive* for it.

“Strive” means to exert a lot of energy and effort toward a goal.

So, far from simply saying we should rely on the eventual coming of God’s kingdom as an antidote to daily worry, Jesus is saying we should actively work for the spread of the kingdom. And as we do, some of the things we fret about are going to become non-issues because we’ve got more important things to be busy with.

None of this is to say that we won’t therefore have some normal worries.

- We can’t love someone without worrying about threats to his or her well-being.

- We cannot be sensitive persons without occasional concern that we haven't done all we should.
- We cannot listen to the news without some uneasiness about the direction many things in the world appear to be going.

But we can be focused enough on the things of God that we're able to relax about our priorities and have confidence in God's providential care. And that's a definition of "hope."

You see, hope actually assumes that the pessimists are sometimes *right* in the short run, but it ultimately trusts the long-run view, and *that* confidence has a way of leaking back into our present circumstances.

That's why, instead of wringing our hands in despair, we clasp our hands in prayer.

Dr. Edward Hallowell is a child and adult psychologist who taught at Harvard for more than 20 years and has now left academia to devote his full professional attention to his clinical practice, lectures and the writing of books. Back in the 1990s, he was the one who brought Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to the public's awareness, but he's also made a study of worry, which is the subject of one of his books.

Writing about worry a few years ago for *Psychology Today* magazine, he offered several suggestions for dealing with excessive worry, but finally he said this:

“Talk to God when you feel worried.... Brain scans and EEG monitors show beneficial changes in the brain during meditation and prayer. The changes correlate with most of our measures of improved health, *including longevity* and reduced incidence of illness.”

In his book on worry, Hallowell revealed that he is a Christian, and so in an interview with *Psychology Today*, the interviewer asked him if that admission

was a risk for someone of prominence in the psychiatric community. He acknowledged that it was a risk insofar as some people might dismiss him, but he added that he most often advised patients to develop a spiritual life and, therefore, felt it was important to acknowledge his own. And he said that spirituality is a “very powerful part of the mind.” He concluded,

“In my case, a relationship with God is another source of connection. And ultimately, it makes sense in my life in ways that nothing else can.”

When Robert Louis Stevenson, racked by tuberculosis, was nearing the end of his life, his wife came in one morning and said,

“I suppose in spite of all your trouble, you will tell me again that it is a beautiful day.”

The great novelist answered,

“Yes, my dear. I refuse to let that row of medicine bottles be the circumference of my horizon.”

You cannot add to your lifespan by worrying, but you likely will when you are open to the divine optimism that is rooted in God’s kingdom. That divine optimism is connected to the long term, to be sure, but its power flows back to us in the present in the form of

- (1) Great confidence in God and
- (2) The energy to work for the coming of his kingdom right here on earth.

Amen!