

## **Don't Worry Be Happy** **Matthew 6:24-34**

A new Mercedes owner was out for a late night drive. The top was down, the breeze blowing through what was left of his hair, and he decided to see how fast his car could go. As the needle jumped to 85 mph, he suddenly saw flashing red and blue lights behind him. He thought, "There is no way that police car can keep up with me," so he hit the gas and in no time was up to 100 mph. But then he thought to himself, "What am I doing?"

He quickly slowed down and pulled over. The policeman walked up and asked for his license and registration. After looking it over the policeman said, "Look, I am supposed to be going home in about five minutes. I really don't want to have to do the paperwork on this, so if you can give me a good excuse why you were trying to get away, I'll let you go."

The man looked at the policeman and said, "Last week my wife ran off with a cop. I was afraid you were trying to give her back."

"On your way," said the policeman.

Most of us have little things that we are afraid of. My daughter Kallie, like me when I was her age, has a fear of the dark, and so each night when we tuck her into bed, she asks for multiple lights to be left on. My son Wiley, on the other hand, really doesn't seem to mind the dark at all. In fact, when he goes to bed, he wants every light turned off and lots of times to make it extra dark, he sleeps with one of those blindfolds on.

To be honest with you, up until a few months ago, I really didn't think Wiley had any fears at all. That was until we learned that Wiley is very worried that something might happen to Amy or me.

We were bringing Kallie and Wiley to the YMCA for parents night out when Wiley said, "You aren't going to leave us are you?" I said, "Wiley you had a great time last month and you said you wanted to do it again." He said, "No not tonight. I mean, you aren't going to leave us are you?" I wasn't sure if he meant when I go on a retreat or maybe he was thinking about some of his friends in school who are being raised by a single parent, so I simply said, "Wiley, sometimes I have retreats or lock-ins, but no I am not going to leave you." Frustrated he finally said, "Dad, are you going to die?" I was kind of caught off guard, so Amy fielded the death question saying, "Wiley, everything and everyone eventually dies, but we are going to be with you until you are very old. You have nothing to worry about." But from time to time he will still make comments or ask questions letting us know that he is still worrying about it.

Our New Testament lesson this morning is found in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and he begins this section talking about money saying, "No one can be a slave of two masters because he will hate one and love the other. You cannot serve both God and money," which leads to what seems to be his main point saying, "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? Worrying about these things won't benefit you at all."

It is important to realize that Jesus is not talking about fear of the dark or of heights or of snakes or these kinds of things. Jesus is talking about those things that we can't let go of... those things that seem to always be on our minds.

Jesus goes on to talk about how God takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields and he tells us that we are more important than birds and flowers, so surely God will take care of us even more.

Jesus makes his case and he ends by saying, “These are the things the Gentiles or the Pagans worry about, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. So strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. And do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “The Bible functions in the church primarily to nurture and shape the life of the community and the lives of the faithful individuals in the community. It presents a peculiar God, whose character is revealed in Jesus and whose modes of operating are depicted over a long history of engagements with the chosen people. In specific ways the Bible clarifies what life under the reign of God looks like, [and] how faithful disciples think and act, what priorities they set, and what passions control their beings. More often than not, the Bible does this not by prescribing rules, but by prodding the imaginations of the faithful, by offering scenarios, by posing questions about life without giving direct answers, by forcing readers to stop and take stock, by molding intuitions and sensitivities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the slice of the Sermon on the Mount. The passage confronts its readers with a series of choices: serving God or pursuing wealth; trusting God or fretting over life’s necessities; seeking God’s rule or worrying about tomorrow.”

Jesus’ message is simple: Don’t worry about anything, but instead place your trust in God.

I had a friend in seminary whose goal was to simply get a “C” in every class he took. If that meant he didn’t have to open his book, he didn’t open his book. In fact there were lots of classes where he didn’t even buy the book. The night before he was supposed to take his ordination exams, a group of us went out to watch a big basketball game. Ordination exams for a seminary student are a lot like the bar for law students. At about 10:00 p.m. I asked, “Shouldn’t you be studying for your exam’s tomorrow?” He looked at me sarcastically and said, “Steve, don’t you think I am worth more than a bird or than a flower? Remember, Jesus said, ‘don’t worry.’” Amazingly, he passed all four of his exams on his first try. I never said anything to him about studying again.

Still, as Bible scholar William Barclay says, “Jesus is not advocating a shiftless, thriftless, reckless, thoughtless, improvident attitude to life; He is forbidding a care-worn, worried fear, which takes all the joy out of life... [after all] Jesus is not saying that birds don’t work. It has been argued that no one works harder than the average sparrow to make a living; the point that He is making is that they do not worry. They do not strain to see a future which cannot be seen, and they do not seek to find security against the future in things stored up and accumulated.”

When I was a kid, like Wiley, I too worried that something might happen to my parents, because, as Wiley tells us at least once a week as we are tucking him into bed, “I really hope nothing happens to you because I love you so much and I’d miss you too much if you weren’t here.” But I think another part of it had to do with the concern that if something happened to them, who would take care of us? As a kid I didn’t worry about having enough to eat or clothes to wear because I knew my parents would take care of it, and anything that my parents couldn’t take care of, I knew God would.

But as I got older, I found that I did start to worry about more things. I still knew my parents would provide for me, but my wants and desires changed along the way. In Jr. High, my biggest worry was fitting in. At the time O.P. was the big name brand that all the guys were wearing, and I remember telling my mom that I had to wear O.P.s like everyone else. The problem was that O.P. shorts cost around \$18 and the K-Mart knock-offs that were the exact same shorts except they didn't have that all important O.P. sewn onto the right pocket, cost around \$8. While all my begging didn't get me my O.P. shorts, my mom did sew O.P. onto the right pockets of all the shorts I did have.

As I got older still, my worries seemed to grow as well. I started worrying about girls and about money. And while it took me longer than most, I eventually even started worrying about grades and college. Now that I am married with two children, my worries seem to be at their highest point ever. I worry about something happening to them, I worry about something happening to me, leaving them to struggle financially without me. I worry about the cost of braces for two. I worry about the rising cost of college. I worry about boys. I did worry about the cost of Kallie's eventual wedding. That is until a couple years back, Kallie and I came to an agreement. After college, and not until she is at least twenty-five, when she meets the right guy, I will give her two plane tickets and \$1,000 to go to Las Vegas to get married the more economical way. I started with an offer of \$500 but even at six she was a tough negotiator. By the way, Amy doesn't know about this, so if we could keep this on the down low.

So what do we do with Jesus' words to not worry? The people he was speaking to didn't have to worry about name brand clothes or the the cost of braces or college tuition going up every year. They didn't have to worry about the stock market or retirement plans. Things were so much easier back then. Right?

John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Presbyterian Church says, "Do you think living conditions [for the people Jesus was speaking to] were easier or more difficult than living conditions in our day? They were more difficult. Most of them were incredibly poor. They lived on less than a dollar a day. They would be poor until they died. Ninety-five percent of them would never be able to read or write. Many of them were lame or sick. They had no medicines. Plagues would come and kill up to a third of an entire city. A lot of them were slaves who would never be free. And if you were a baby, the odds were you would not live past the age of 30. That was their world."

As I look out, my guess is that at least a few of you are over the age of 30 already. So while they didn't need to worry about a lot of the things that we worry about, there were a lot of things that they worried about that we don't. And what Jesus says is, "If you think more money, better health, newer clothes, a nicer car, a bigger house, and more success will make you worry free you are in for a big surprise. Chances are you will never reach the point where you have everything exactly as you think you need it, so just stop worrying."

Back in 1988, Bobby McFerrin came out with a catchy little song that had a similar message, and some of the lyrics were:

*"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,  
But when you worry you make it double.*

*Don't worry, be happy.  
Ain't got no place to lay your head,  
          somebody came and took your bed.  
Don't worry, be happy.  
The landlord say your rent is late  
          He may have to litigate.  
Don't worry, be happy.  
Ain't got no cash, ain't got no style,  
          ain't got no gal to make you smile, don't worry be happy.  
'Cause when you worry your face will frown  
          And that will bring everybody down  
Don't worry, be happy."*

Again, the message is simple. The hard part is actually being able to live it. I mean clearly I've got style. But, what if I didn't. Is that worth worrying over? On the other hand, if I am about to be evicted...

While we know that worrying does any good, I once heard someone say that worrying is a lot like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere. Well, while we know this, we can't just stop worrying simply because we want to. Have you ever told yourself you weren't going to worry about something anymore? Every time I try this, I end up worrying even more.

The reality is that as human beings there are just certain things that we will always worry about. For instance, I will always worry about the safety of my family, and I will always worry about their future, whether I need to or not. This isn't going to change. But I believe that Jesus knows this.

Whenever I make a "things to do" list, I always put some small things at the top of the list, so that I can quickly check them off as things that I've accomplished. But when you read through the Gospels, you will find that Jesus doesn't do this. There are no small tasks or small goals given for the sole purpose of checking them off our list. Jesus places big goals in front of us challenging us to keep moving forward continually trying to live by the example that he has set for us.

Jesus is not trying to make us feel guilty because we have things that we worry about, but he is trying to get us to examine our lives getting us to ask the questions, "Why are we worrying?" and "What are we worrying about?"

Where Jesus is challenging me most in this passage, is in those worries that I have created for myself. I have created them by letting myself worry about what others think about the clothes I wear, the car I drive, or the phone I use. I have created them because I want to control my future to make sure everything turns out exactly as I want it to. I have created them by being so focused on my wants and desires, that I have forgotten how God is calling me to live. When my focus is always on myself, and what I think I need to have, I forget about those around me who just want something to eat, who just want a roof over their head, who just want a blanket or a coat to keep them warm. The problem isn't that I don't trust God to provide the opportunities for me and my family to be taken care of adequately. The problem is that I want to make all the decisions instead of allowing God to have some say in my life helping me to see that so much of what I worry about is trivial when compared to some of the real needs around me.

Shortly before Amy and I married, Amy's dad, knowing that I can't dance, decided that he would teach us to dance together as a couple so that I would not be a total embarrassment at our reception. And the first thing he did was to ask, "Who leads?" Silence. Now I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear Amy say it. A few more seconds and finally through clenched teeth, she said, "He leads." "And who follows?" Silence again. "I follow."

The difficulty is that when someone else leads, we are not in control. Again, in the words of Ortberg, Jesus says, "Today, I will lead and you follow. Don't worry about your health. Don't worry about your wardrobe. Don't worry about your finances. Don't worry about tomorrow. I'll lead and you follow, and I will show you those things that truly are important to the kingdom of God. But keep this in mind... this does not mean that problems won't arise, but worrying today about what might happen tomorrow won't make tomorrow's problems any less."

Now if we can go back for a moment to the very beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is found in chapter five of the Gospel of Matthew, we read that when Jesus saw the crowds he went up a hill. His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them. This is important because it tells us that the audience Jesus was speaking to was his disciples. This is further emphasized in our scripture reading this morning when we hear him say to those he is teaching, "You of little faith". Jesus does not use this phrase with those who are on the outside looking in curiously trying to understand, but he uses it with his disciples in their moments of weakness... he uses it when he is challenging them.

What this means is that Jesus was challenging those who already had an experience with him, so that when we hear him making his demands on their lives telling them how to live and act and asking them to believe in him, we realize that they already have some understanding of this God that he is asking them to place their trust in. They have already heard the stories and seen what this God is capable of and they know that this God that Jesus speaks of is not off in the distance somewhere, but instead he is deeply involved in the lives of his people.

With this being said, Jesus saw the crowd, and so he knows that his words will be overheard. He knows that his disciples are not the only ones who will be affected by what he has to say, but he is speaking to those who know that they can place their future in God's hands because they know what God has already done for them.

Jesus is speaking to you and to me... the community of faith who has experienced God's love, God's mercy, God's compassion, and God's care.

Stephen Phillips  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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