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Matthew 6:25-34 – Worry Wart

Read Matthew 6:25-34.

A couple of months ago I told you a joke about a patient in a mental hospital who spent every day with his ear against his hospital room wall, listening intently. One day the patient called for one of the nurses to come into his room to listen too. The nurse came in and pressed his ear against the wall for several minutes and finally said, "I don't hear anything." "I know," replied the patient, "it's been like that every day!" So it is with us at times. We cling to an invisible wall waiting for something drastic to happen and it never does. We spend much of our time worrying ourselves into another world.

I read a quote one time that said **“worry is a misuse of the imagination.”** It is completely true. We worry about things that will likely never happen. Things that have not happened yet. Things that have already happened and we can do nothing about. We find ourselves spinning our wheels. **Worry is like a rocking chair, it gives you something to do but doesn't get you anywhere.**

I read an article a little while ago that said that the average person's anxiety is focused on:

40% -- things that will never happen

30% -- things about the past that can't be changed

12% -- things about criticism by others, mostly untrue

10% -- about health, which gets worse with stress

8% -- about real problems that will be faced

So 82% of the things we worry about, we can do nothing about, 10% are things that we make worse by worrying, and only 8% of the things we worry about actually deserve our concern.

I imagine that most of you had one of two primary reactions to Jesus' words in Matthew this morning. I suspect there is a group of you that heard Jesus say, “do not worry” and thought, “Yeah, that sounds pretty good. I worry way too much and I would feel a lot better if I could just stop, if I could simply not care so much.” But there is probably another group of you that are saying, “that is a little crazy. Just look around, how can we not worry, we are surrounded by war, famine, natural disasters. Not to mention I

need to worry about my family, my job, what's for lunch after church. . . or what I am going to put in the sermon suggestion box after the service."

I think Jesus' point is important for us all if we understand clearly what he is saying, Jesus is calling us to settle somewhere in between these two extremes. He is not saying that being concerned about something is bad. He is not saying that we need to rid our lives from all worry. He is definitely not saying that we should simply stop caring about stuff. But he is definitely saying that we are often concerned with the wrong things. That we let the things of this world concern us more than our relationship with God. When Jesus says, "**do not worry about the food or drink you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body,**" I do not think he is asking us to sit at our kitchen tables with plates and cups expecting our food and drink to magically appear and I do not think Jesus is telling us to walk around naked hoping that our clothes will just show up. Jesus is using strong language to encourage us to order our priorities. He wants us to understand where our focus should be.

Worry is something that increasingly steals our attention. It is an example of how the material world steals our attention away from God. And more than ever, people are worrying themselves sick. Scientists and researchers have increasingly found that stress, anxiety and worry have serious consequences on our physical health.

A few years ago I read a book called "**The Paradox of Choice.**" The entire book was about how American consumerism has added stress to the lives of Americans. **We are taught at a very young age that we need the best of everything.** So what do we do, well we worry about whether we have the best. We decide we need to buy a car. So we worry about which kind will be the best. Which dealership would be the best to buy from? New or used? Which financing plan would make the most sense? And then what type of car to buy? What features do we want? What color? What material for the interior? Do we want the extended warranty? The choices are endless and in our pursuit for the best, we forget we are just looking for something to carry us from point A to point B. We really just need something good enough to do that.

Cable television is a great example. Before cable television Americans basically had three channels to watch. There was not a lot of channel surfing. You watched what was on. That was good enough. But now most people have at least a hundred television stations and what do we do. . . we channel surf. We

spend minutes, sometimes hours just flipping through the channels looking for the best show on. . . and we usually miss out on a lot in the process.

The world gives us a lot to worry about and I think our worry is directly related to our desires for control. As humans, and especially as Americans, we are control people. . . we like to have things in our control. We fight over the remote. If things do not go our way we quit or just walk away. We are prideful and think that everything should be done the way we like it and are often unwilling to look for compromise. And **we don't worry about those things we control because we can always do with them what we wish.** I don't worry about my next meal because I can just go down the street and buy a hamburger. I don't worry about clothes because I have a closet full of possibilities. **But when we start considering things beyond our control we start to get a little uncomfortable.** What kind of person is my daughter going to be? Is my 401K going to leave enough for retirement? Is my health going to fail me? **Today, Jesus is telling us he wants control of the things we think we control and he wants our worry for the things we know we can't control.** He wants our trust in everything.

I am a worrier. I have a tendency to worry about lots of things and this was exasperated a few years ago when I worked as a chaplain at a hospital. As many of you know when I was in seminary I spent a summer working at a Chicago hospital as a chaplain. There seemed to me to be a lot of things to worry about in that job. Many of the patients I saw were near death or experiencing serious traumas. Several times I had to minister to grieving families who had lost loved ones. There were no easy answers to their questions. I worried about having the right words to say. I worried about hindering their faith. I worried about looking like I had no clue what I was doing. I worried about offending someone. I worried about being in the doctors' or nurses' way when they were treating patients. **I worried about tripping over someone's breathing machine and disconnecting it.** You get the picture, I worried a lot.

Well one day I decided to bring my worry up to my supervisor who was the pastoral care director at the hospital. I told him that I knew I worried too much, but could not figure out how to get rid of it. I told him I could not picture myself not caring about all of those things. He wisely told me that my goal should not be to stop caring all together, because it is my attention to detail that helps me to treat patients well, it is what helps me to stay on top of things. . . **he said my goal should be to keep my concern focused on things immediately within my grasp.** His message was one that was based upon the Word of God . . . and found in today's reading, **"have concern for today,"** care about this moment, not the last minute, not the

next minute, but this very moment. **Worry is often a distraction from what we need to do right now.** We paralyze ourselves. We are thrown off our goal or #1 task. Verse 33 tells us what our #1 task ought to be: **“seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** My worry was preventing me from deliberately doing what God wanted me to do with the patients I was working with. I was no longer thinking about what I could do to help them interact with God, but constantly consumed with thinking about how I might mess things up. I was tentative. . . worry had prevented me from confidently following God’s lead.

Things are not usually as bad as we make them out to be. Often our imaginations lead us to the most ridiculous things. Our worry is usually very unrealistic and simply scares us from doing what we ought to.

A dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet is composed of something less than one glass of water. That is, all the fog covering seven city blocks 100 feet deep could be, if it were gotten all together, held in a single drinking glass; it would not quite fill it. This can be compared to the things we worry about. **If we could see into the future and if we could see our problems in their true light, they wouldn't consume us – distract us from God -- but instead could be relegated to their true size and place.** And if all the things most people worry about were reduced to their true size, you could probably stick them all into a water glass, too.

God wants us to trust in Him. God wants to change our focus. He does not want our preoccupation with worldly things to supersede our dependence on Him. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, **“whatever you do, you must do all for the glory of God.”** He is not saying stop cooking dinner and simply pray instead or just walk outside and don’t think about driving, God will drive your car for you. The point is when you are doing these things, make them your worship. Give them to God. Don’t let them consume your heart. Give them your time but not your motivation.

I think Paul probably gives us the best practical advice in Philippians 4:6-7, Paul says, **“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** In Matthew, Jesus basically just tells us not to worry, but instead to trust that God will provide for us. Paul helps us to see how this is accomplished.

Paul's words are really helpful, but you know it is especially us control people who hate these types of verses. Verses like these often strike us through the heart. I can not count the number of times that I have been facing a dilemma, worried about something or someone and have explained my aggravations to Dana. I am trying to figure out what I can do, how I can fix the problem and what does Dana say, **"well have you prayed about it?"** Prayed about it!! What is that going to do? I need to do something.

We all have a tendency to think that if something needs to be done then we better do it because no one else will. So we sit around and sulk over the decision. **Well God is telling us today that worrying about it is accomplishing nothing.** It is fruitless. All the worry in the world today can do nothing about the cares and problems of tomorrow. Zig Zigler says, **"If you pray you don't need to worry, and if you don't pray it does no good to worry."** Our worry is not going to get us anywhere, and our obsessive contemplation over the things of this life is simply an indication of our lack of trust in God.

J. Arthur Rank, an English executive, decided to do all his worrying on one day each week. He chose Wednesdays. When anything happened that gave him anxiety and annoyed his ulcer, he would write it down and put it in his worry box and forget about it until next Wednesday. The interesting thing was that on the following Wednesday when he opened his worry box, he found that most of the things that had disturbed him the past six days were already settled. It would have been useless to have worried about them. Worry is our creation and usually dissipates when we push it aside, but if we hold onto it, it will weigh us down.

When I worry I am telling God, "I am trying to figure out the answer here, something I can do to fix it because God I am not sure I will like what you decide to do about it." If I don't tithe I know I will have enough money, but if I do tithe I am not sure. God that is too big a risk, I can't put that much trust in you.

Our passage makes it clear that God cares for all of his creatures. When we are faithful to God, God will uphold his end of the deal and guide us through difficulty. We may not like the result, but God knows what is best for us. Worrying does nothing. . . Jesus says that it cannot add a single hour to our life. Worry can't add an inch to our height, or even money to our bank account. Worry is idleness, it is simply a distraction from action or simply a failure to rest in God's provision. Why worry when you can trust? We probably do not think of worry as a form of idolatry, but it is when we allow it to take our eyes off of Jesus.

The biblical key to overcoming worry is to learn how to utilize God’s strength to accomplish what is set before us today. I believe that one of the most important ways of actually carrying this out is to learn to express regularly our gratitude to God for what he has done, for us in the past. Notice this was a key part of what Paul says about worry. **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”** A way of reversing the trend toward anxiety is to look around at what we have and what God has done and say, “thank you.” You have provided for me in the past, I have confidence you will work out tomorrow too.

While touring Italy, a man visited a cathedral that had been completed on the outside only. Once inside, the traveler found an artist kneeling before an enormous wall upon which he had just begun to create a mosaic. On some tables nearby were thousands of pieces of colored ceramic. Curious, the visitor asked the artist how he would ever finish such a large project. The artist answered that he knew how much he could accomplish in one day. Each morning, he marked off an area to be completed that day and didn’t worry about what remained outside that space. That was the best he could do; and if he faithfully did his best each day, one day the mosaic would be finished.

Max Lucado says, **“God will help you deal with whatever bad things come up when the time comes. The key is this: meet today’s problems with today’s strength. Don’t start tackling tomorrow’s problems until tomorrow. You do not have tomorrow’s strength yet. You simply have enough for today.”**

In the Lord’s Prayer that Christians recite, we pray for God to give us **“today, our daily bread.”** We do not ask for tomorrow’s, or yesterday’s, or next week’s, but today’s. And that is what he gives us. The strength for today. **So don’t waste that strength worrying about tomorrow, you won’t have enough.**

Perhaps you have heard the words of the Serenity Prayer often attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or at least the first few lines, but listen to the whole thing and think seriously about how we can seek to live it out.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.

What Jesus wants us to understand is that it is not all about us. God runs the world, not us. We may be able to manipulate a few things here and there, but ultimately God is master of the universe.

God wants to be first in our lives. He is tired of us worrying about stuff and not about our relationship with Him. He is tired of our saying that once this gets settled or once I do this, then I will have time to devote to Him. Today Jesus is telling us to quit worrying about that other stuff and start concentrating on how you can use it for God's glory. Spend your time consumed with something that makes the things of this life look meaningless. Devote your time, and especially your mind to God's desire for your life. If you do this you will experience true peace and freedom from worry's grasp on your heart. **You will experience what Paul says, "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, [and which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**