

# OVERCOMING ANXIETY AND WORRY

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Charles Dickens wrote the classic book, A Tale of Two Cities. It was a very hard time in old England, and Dickens' first sentence introducing his story was, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

With the financial setbacks of the past few days, many in our country and around the world are beginning to feel that this may be "the worst of times." Perhaps you personally are facing financial difficulty. You have watched your retirement funds diminish or disappear. Your debt load may be more than you can handle. You may have lost your job, or are in danger of losing it. Perhaps, you are facing a health crisis in your family or with you personally.

Whenever you turn on the news or read a newspaper or magazine, all the financial news is bad. It's easy to become panicked and depressed.

Pastors and church leaders are also concerned about the well-being of their churches during this time. When people's individual incomes are affected, there can also be a diminishment of resources made available for the Lord's work. I am concerned for pastors and ministry leaders in our Fellowship who wrestle with the financial needs of their churches and organizations. The load of worry and concern can become rather heavy for leaders as well.

Jesus has help for us when we are worried and stressed regarding our finances. So, I wanted to share some thoughts with you from Matthew 6:19-34. These are really not my thoughts—they are the Lord's own words dealing with overcoming anxiety and worry.

I know what it is to be full of anxiety and worry.

Early on in my ministry I had a very serious problem with my nerves. At that time I was both campus pastor and student life director for a Christian college.

The middle of the spring semester became an intense time of pressure for me. That's the period of each year when students have an inclination to seek release from the tension of tests and term papers by erupting with pranks and parties. When students misbehaved, it made me look bad. After all, I was the person in charge of spiritual and social life!

I would become irritable. My stomach muscles would begin to tense. Getting to sleep took hours. Then, something more serious started to happen—my legs, arms and back became pain centers. I happen to have photo-sensitive skin which means I can be very easily sunburned. Three times in my life I have been so seriously sunburned that I have required doctor's care to recover. The pain from sunburn is equivalent to a million straight pins sticking you simultaneously. My nerve pain was exactly like my sunburn pain—except, externally, you could not see the effects on the skin.

My nerves absolutely began to go berserk on me. I would itch and scratch uncontrollably. Since we lived only two blocks from a hospital, one night I left home at 3:30 a.m., walked over to the emergency room and pleaded for a shot to take away the pain.

My anxiety increased as I realized I was still in my twenties, and already was unable to handle stress. How could I ever remain in an occupation which required me to deal with people needs and problems, or required any amount of stress at all?

Several nights after the hospital visit, another nerves attack hit as I was trying to go to sleep. At that time I had been studying a segment of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:19-34. Intellectually, I was beginning to understand the concepts of the Lord concerning overcoming worry and anxiety—and this particular evening God gave me the strength to act upon what I was learning.

The first signs of pain had started in my legs and arms when in desperation I said to the Lord: “I have worried about this problem all day. Now, it is your turn. I’m going to sleep. Goodnight!” He must have been waiting for me to come to that point because immediately I went to sleep and from that moment on I was healed. Only once since then has there been a recurrence of the nerve pain—it happened shortly after I had given a testimony of healing.

Over the years I have faced far greater pressures than the ones I dealt with on that Christian college campus. It has been this section of teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which has given me the mental mind set to keep the healing, and not revert to the behavior and thought patterns which almost ended whatever ministry I would have.

I share all this at the beginning because I want you to know that I am not giving you theoretical counsel about dealing with anxiety and worry. I have been through the fire, and I have found the Word of the Lord works.

Throughout Matthew 6, Jesus deals with our relationship to the Father. In the first half of the chapter (verses 1-18), He tells us to live out our spiritual disciplines in the presence of the Father, and not before men. In the second half of the chapter (verses 19-34), He gives us four major principles of practicing His presence and thereby overcoming worry and anxiety.

**First, Jesus teaches us to hold lightly earthly things and hold tightly eternal things (6:19-21).**

An earthly thing is that which is external to us. Jesus speaks of it as something which is subject to deterioration (moth/rust) or theft. The words *moth*, *rust*, and *thieves break through and steal* give us a good idea of what persons treasured in His day.

Moths affect clothing. An elaborate wardrobe was the treasure of some. Rust is the English word we use for the literal Greek term, “eats away.” Most likely, Jesus intended this word “eats away” to refer to crop storage rather than metal rust. A sign of wealth, or treasure, was the size of the crop that was stored in a bin (see Luke 12:16-21—the rich fool who sought to build bigger barns). Another treasure consisted of the money and valuables a person keeps stashed in his own home. Houses were built of stone and mortar or mud brick, and thieves commonly dug through and stole these treasures. Jesus therefore tells the people of His day not to treasure up for themselves clothes, crops, and precious metals and stones; but to lay up for themselves treasures in heaven.

Since we can take nothing material into heaven, our priorities in life must not be on the earthly.

My security in the days of nerve attacks was bound up with my job. If I kept my job, then I had a future; but if I were dismissed from my job because I could not keep order on campus, then I had no value as a person. My treasure was in my work—and yet my work was external to me. I could not take my job as campus pastor and student life director into heaven. I needed, therefore, to hold it lightly in my hand. Let God take it from me if He wants. It’s not the end of the world, nor the end of me. My trust and my treasure are in God, not this job.

How tightly are you holding on to things you can never take into eternity? How about easing up your grip and letting go? Are you uptight over things which will not matter 100 years from now, or even a year from now?

The humorous story is told of the man who gave instructions that when he died each of his three sons was to place \$10,000 of their inheritance inside his coffin. Finally, he died and left a vast fortune. At the graveside, the oldest son came up to the open casket and slipped an envelope with \$10,000 cash into his father's inside suit pocket. The second son came and did the same thing. When the third son came to the casket, he could be seen slipping something out of his father's pocket and putting something else in. After the burial, his brothers confronted him: "What did you take out of dad's pocket?" "Well," he replied, "I gave dad his \$10,000. I put a \$30,000 check inside his suit and took back \$20,000 in change!" We really can't take it with us, can we?

**A second principle given by Jesus for overcoming anxiety and worry is that we keep a clear outlook on life (6:22-23).**

Anyone who wears glasses knows that you must keep them clean if you are to see clearly. Jesus says the eye is the light of the whole body and if you have the wrong outlook on life you will be full of darkness.

How does a person get a clear outlook on life? A clue to that answer may be found in this phrase: "if your eyes are good." The King James translates that phrase: "if your eye is single." The word translated "good" or "single" actually comes from a root word which always means "generous."

To Jesus, good eyesight is one that sees the needs of others and acts generously to meet those needs; bad eyesight is one that sees only his own needs and selfishly pursues only his own interests.

When you live for self alone you will be full of darkness.

When I was pastoring, we began the first efforts to relocate the church. We needed \$150,000 to enter escrow on the lease of the 6 acres at Newport and Fair. Throughout the late summer, we shared that financial need with the congregation and asked them to give a sacrificial

offering. We set a September Sunday as the target date. When the offering was counted for that day, we had only received about \$35,000 (only! \$35,000).

I was really discouraged and genuinely doubted if we should even make the effort to relocate. We set a Board meeting to determine our course of action, and I really sought the Lord's help in developing a reaction which would be in His will. During that time the Lord dealt with me about the fact that I was only looking at the needs of our church. I felt God saying to me: "Open your eyes and see if there is a pressing financial need in some other ministry." Sure enough, such a need became immediately evident. When our Board met, we still felt the Holy Spirit was in the relocation—but that, as an act of faith and trust in Him, we should take \$5,000 from the General Fund (not the restricted money the people had given) and give it to that ministry. To this day, I am still not quite sure how God met all the needs our church had; but I know He did!

And, best of all, I learned again that a generous outlook is a sure way to be released from my clutching, grasping tendencies. When I am only concerned about what happens to me, I can never see clearly.

You may be in a relationship which is bringing you a lot of stress or anxiety. You may be saying, "oh, if he/she would only meet my needs." But, if your goal is to only have your own needs met, then within you is psychological and spiritual darkness. The only person who receives love is the person who gives it. Keep a generous outlook on life, on others!

**A third principle given by Jesus for overcoming anxiety and worry is that we do not let money get in the driver's seat of our life (6:24).**

Jesus tells us we cannot be a slave to God and money. Notice he does not say we **should not** be a slave to money, but we **cannot**. The

word for money in the older translations is “mammon.” Originally, for the Jews, mammon described something which had been entrusted to someone else. In the days before banks, you might want to trust a valuable asset to someone else when you went on a trip. This would be “mammon,” something entrusted. Over the course of time, the meaning of the word “mammon” changed from that which is entrusted (passive) to that in which a person trusts (active). It is easy, therefore, to see why the modern translations use the word “money” for “mammon.” People do more than entrust their money **to** a bank or investment, they trust **in** their money for their security, their well-being, their life-style.

Money gets in the driver’s seat when we get into debt (and I do not refer to debt which we can safely amortize and which is secured by capital items) which eats away our commitment to God, family, and others. We become so busy financing our desired lifestyle that we have little time to give our families, the church, the community. We spend more on interest than we do on giving to God and others. Jesus is saying, “don’t buy into that kind of lifestyle;” and if you are in that cycle—begin getting out. You may not rid yourself of your debts overnight, but get back on the road to letting God rule how you spend your time and money, rather than letting debt rule you.

God is really only concerned with two things about you and money: how you get it and what you do with it. If you don’t get it honestly—you then serve it rather than God. If you don’t spend it by letting Him be Lord of it—you serve it rather than Him.

Mammon may not always be money. It may be anything other than God in which you put your trust. When my trust was in holding my job, my nerves went wild. When I came to the point of saying, “God, I’ll do what I can do—and you have to do the rest,” God gave me peace.

**A fourth principle for overcoming worry and anxiety is our emotions must be taught to obey what Jesus teaches (6:25-34).**

The strong presence of anxiety and worry in our life indicate that negative and harmful feelings have taken the governing role. How do we deal with these strong emotions?

Jesus gives us some logical steps to take in reordering our thought processes. He is really telling us that our rational side must take control away from our emotional side, that thinking must be in control of feeling, that what we believe is to govern how we behave.

This is not an easy a transition to make. Anyone dominated by the strong negative emotions of anxiety and worry usually does not consider himself to be in a position to act or think logically. When I was overcome with attacks on my nerves, the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-34 actually made me angry. They only seemed to condemn me more. And, indeed, when we are already in a state of anxiety, we may simply increase anxiety by thinking: “I’m not supposed to be this way.” I wanted a quick fix, a pill from Jesus that I could take for instant relief. He kept insisting that I learn His process for dealing with anxiety, that I must train my emotions to be subject to His word or teaching. Even though I was given an immediate healing, that healing simply followed my wrestling with this passage—my coming to a point that said: “Lord, I take you at your word; this is your problem now, and not mine.” The healing was maintained by continual practice of the processes given by the Lord for reconstructing the mind, and making it master of the feelings.

I want to warn you that this is a developmental process, that these steps given by the Lord may not be realized instantaneously in our experience. It has taken us awhile to fall into the trap of being ruled by our emotions, and it may take us some time to totally reverse the process. An ocean liner makes a sweeping turn when it changes direction—it doesn’t just do an abrupt about-face. So also, we may need to see ourselves as being given the time to make a turn-around.

Here are the specific seven steps the Lord gives in putting the mind in charge of the feelings as a key to overcoming worry and anxiety.

**First,** He teaches that life itself is more important than the things needed to sustain it: food and clothing (or whatever else). “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?” In other words, surely the God who put life into us in the first place is able to give us the lesser things needed to sustain life. If God has done the greater, then can we not trust Him for the smaller?

**Second,** He points us to the example of the birds. They do not store away food, yet the Father takes care of them. Birds work--God just does not drop seed or worms into their mouth. Jesus’ point is that their labor does not involve anxious consideration for the future. If God provided the process whereby the lesser things of His creation are fed—the birds—has He not also provided a process whereby that which is of more value to Him, ourselves, may be cared for as well? The old children’s song puts well this truth.

“There’s a little birdie in the apple tree,  
Chirping out his little song so merrily.  
He’s a lucky birdie and I think he knows  
That God is watching over him where’ere he goes.  
But that little birdie isn’t half so dear  
As every little boy and girl that God put here,  
And as I watch that birdie in the apple tree  
I know that God is watching over me.”

**Third,** Jesus shows us the complete futility of worry, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” Worry serves no positive purpose. It does not prolong your life (if anything, it shortens it!).

**Fourth,** our Lord points us to the flowers of the field as another example against worry. The lilies are alive today, and tomorrow are thrown into the oven. Why should that be a comfort to us? Because, if

God would take such intricate care to make sure that a flower which blooms for only a day is clothed with tremendous beauty; how much more is God concerned to clothe us with beauty?

**Fifth**, it is the pagans (those who do not know God) who worry. We are children of the Father. He knows our needs, and we must trust Him to provide. I have often found that God may provide for my need to be met in a way different from what I planned, but my Heavenly Father watches over me. I am not an orphan left to fate or chance, I am a child of God in whom He is always working out the good.

The **sixth** step Jesus gives in putting our thought life in control over our emotions is to seek first His kingdom. When your attention is absorbed in your own welfare rather than centering first upon God's concerns, things get out of balance. Remember the petitions of the Lord's prayers? Only when we put His concerns first can we pray aright over our own.

Jesus promises that when we seek His kingdom first, all these things shall be added to us. This phrase is being used by some to justify the idea that once God is given our lip service then every material possession is legitimately ours. But, Jesus does not say "everything shall be added to us;" He says, "**these** things..." What things? The things Jesus is talking about in this passage: the basic essentials—enough to eat, to wear, and somewhere to lay your head at night. Seek God first and He will take care of these things.

The **seventh** step in gaining control over the emotionality of worry is to live one day at a time: "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Imagine for a moment that all your troubles and trials could be represented by rocks strewn along the pathway of your life. You have a burlap sack in which you place the rocks, and then you throw the sack

over your shoulder and carry it. The rule of the road, though, is this: you can only pick up the rocks you see on the path you walk today. You cannot run ahead along the road and pick up the rocks belonging to tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow. If you try to pick up anything other than today's concerns, your sack will get too heavy and you will not be able to keep going down the road.

Should you then ever attempt to be concerned about tomorrow's problems? Yes! By all means! However, only deal with the aspect of that future problem that can be handled today. Don't put tomorrow's boulders into today's sack! Learn to live sequentially. Learn to trust God just for today!

At the same time, do not put into tomorrow what God wants you to deal with today. For example, today is the day He calls you into salvation if you are unsaved. Today, He calls you to give forgiveness if there is enmity between yourself and someone else. Today He asks you to deal with anger and unforgiveness in your life.

Are you anxious and burdened with worry? Take these words from the Lord and ask Him to use them to renew your mind. Cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you!