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MANAGING YOUR PORTFOLIO - PART 2

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

By Danny Hall

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is instructing his followers to pursue what really matters in life, to hang their future and all that they are on it. When we pursue the things that don't matter, we end up in all the wrong places.

The Sermon on the Mount was designed to correct the thinking of Jesus' followers about what it means to be part of the kingdom of God. In chapter 6, which deals with the goals and values of life, Jesus is trying wean his followers away from the material things that so easily entangle them. He warned in verse 24 that you can't serve two masters. When something masters you, it commands your attention and eventually takes control of your life. Jesus said simply, "You cannot follow God and the pursuit of wealth. One of them will master you and the other will fade away." So we have to make a choice: what is the most important to us? We need to focus our life on that which matters eternally.

In verses 19-21 he posed the question, "What are you investing in?" (See Discovery Paper 4911.) A question logically arises from an obedient response to the call of God to trust him as our master: "If I invest in the things that matter and not in the things of this world, then what's going to happen to me? How am I going to be provided for?" In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus deals with that by posing a second question: "In whom are you going to trust?" Jesus illustrates this simple thought beautifully to call us to the place we need to be if we are to find life in him.

For this reason I say to you, do not be worried [literally, "stop worrying"] about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear for clothing?" For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Jesus begins with a command that he repeats three times in these verses: "Stop worrying."

Stop worrying

Jesus assumes that his listeners are people who will worry, because it's normal for people to worry about how

they're going to make it through the next day. In that culture, most common folks were laborers, and they were paid their wages at the end of the day. That would be their sustenance for the next day. Worrying about where the next day's meal would come from was a way of life, and Jesus understood that.

It's also very common in our experience to worry. We worry about all kinds of things. We worry about what's going to happen to us. We worry about our future. We worry about how we're going to pay the bills. We worry about where our kids are going to go to college and whether we can pay for it. We worry about whether our retirement accounts are going to hold up when we need them. We worry about our medical coverage. We worry because so much of life is about providing for ourselves.

Jesus speaks to that and says, "Stop worrying." He uses two beautiful illustrations from nature to explain. He says, "Stop for a moment and think about the created world. First, notice the birds. You don't see birds punch a time clock, or go out to the market and shop for their food. How do they eat? Although they have to search for food, they're not worried about where it's going to come from. It comes from your Father. Now, as glorious as they are in their flight and design, aren't you worth more?"

"And by the way," Jesus says, "is worrying going to get you anything? Has anyone added an hour to his life by worrying?" (The phrase translated "add an hour to his life" in some translations is rendered "add a cubit to his height.") Considering all the things that are out there, can we extend our lives even one little bit by worrying about things? In fact, we now know that our lives are actually shortened by worrying.

Then Jesus points to the lilies of the field. Probably "lilies" is a general word used of a lot of the wildflowers that grew all over the Palestinian countryside. Jesus says, "Take a look—aren't they gorgeous? And they are handcrafted by God himself. Solomon, the wealthiest and grandest of all the kings of Israel, couldn't hold a candle to the beauty of one of those flowers. But did that flower ever go down to a shopping mall and buy itself something to put on so it would look better? No, your Father clothes that flower in all its beauty. And it's just a flower! It's going to wither and die in no time at all. Aren't *you* far more important to God than a flower?"

Against these glorious pictures of nature Jesus says, "You of little faith, stop worrying! Your heavenly Father cares about you and will provide for you."

Then he draws an important contrast. There are two kinds of people when it comes to worrying: people who are trusting in the wrong things, and people who trust him; or non-kingdom and kingdom people. Those who trust in the wrong things he calls the Gentiles, which is literally "the people of the nations." This was basically a technical term for all those who were outside the people of God. People who aren't following God, who aren't part of the people of God, are worrying all the time about what they're going to wear, where the next meal is coming from, how they can build up their retirement. They're pursuing all these things, trying to protect themselves.

"But," Jesus says, "people who are following me have a different calling: to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." What does it mean to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness?

Seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness

As we've been noticing all through the Sermon on the Mount, to be a kingdom person begins with absolute, complete loyalty to the King. We're back to choosing our master again—which will it be? When we choose to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, and he is our King, it means we completely and absolutely give ourselves to pursuing him—understanding him, knowing him, growing in him, being committed and loyal to him, being committed to his kingdom and his rule in our own lives and in our world.

To pursue his righteousness means we care about the things that God cares about. Our priorities, both in our

own lives and in our community of faith, line up with his priorities for the world.

These are our pursuits as a community. I would not for a moment say they are easy. They have many complex, nuanced applications. But as a community of faith committed to the lordship of Christ, we study God's word, prayerfully looking for what God's priorities are that we too might live them out. When we do, Jesus says, "Everything you need will be provided for you. So stop worrying. I'm going to care for you when you seek me and my kingdom. I can be trusted."

This is a theme that appears throughout Scripture. Let me just remind you of a couple of passages. The Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23, shows us that God gives us everything we need:

"The LORD is my shepherd,

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul;

He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You have anointed my head with oil;

My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

This is a beautiful picture of our being committed to the Shepherd and his caring for every need we have.

The apostle Paul understood this concept, echoing the words of Jesus: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7.)

The simple command of these verses is to put your trust in him and stop worrying. There are all kinds of ways that we could apply this in our own lives. I mentioned earlier that we often fear what will happen to us. We look down the road and wonder what it's going to be like. "Am I going to make it to the end? Am I going to have enough money? Is my retirement going to come in? Am I going to be able to pay for this or that?"

We have a great fear of what will happen to our children. This past week the *U.S. News & World Report* annual

survey of the top colleges came out. Parents run through the list and wonder, “How can I get my child a little higher up that list, so he or she will have a better future?” In fact, some parents leave nothing to chance, but try to line up the best school at every point for their children, starting with preschool, ordering everything they do toward protecting their children’s future.

Sometimes we dream of a more comfortable life. Do you ever do that? I do. I think, “I know I really do have it pretty good when I consider the whole scope of this world, but I sure wish I had such-and-such....” I went into Costco yesterday, and I couldn’t help but stop in front of one of those huge plasma, high-definition TVs. I thought, “How great would it be to sit down and watch my beloved Atlanta Braves this afternoon in hi-def!” There’s a part of us that says, “I know I’m pretty happy, but I’m sure I’d be happier if I had a little bit more.” Then we try to disguise that longing with the pious notion, “If I had more, I’d give more.”

So much of our energy is directed toward controlling the future. One of the truly fun things I do as a pastor is meet with young couples whom God has called to be married. One of the things I most enjoy is listening to them talk, seeing them try to figure everything out, planning their wedding and so on. I’m all for planning, and I ask hard questions to help couples make sure they are thinking about the right things, but it’s sometimes almost humorous, because they just don’t know what life is going to bring them.

So how do we overcome the tendency to try to control things? How do we get to the place where we’re willing to just stop worrying and start trusting? The answer is to understand what our text is really about. I don’t really think it’s about worrying, although that’s an important theme. I think it’s about what God is like. All through this passage we see characteristics of God that call out to us to trust him. Let me suggest a few.

The glory of God

First of all, God is the sovereign Lord of all his creation, the One who has put it all together. Then he is omniscient; he knows everything. “Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” Nothing about your life has ever caught God off guard. There are moments when you’re despairing, or you can’t figure something out, and you’re just absolutely sure that (1) you’re the only person in the world who has ever been through this, and (2) somehow God has missed this. But no! God knows everything you need. And God is wise. He doesn’t just intellectually know your needs, he wisely understands what is best for you.

This passage is full of God’s graciousness to all of his creation. God takes care of the birds and the flowers and everything else. He graciously gives of himself to all living things he has created to meet their needs. He is also a God of mercy. Verse 34: “Do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself.” One of the most merciful things about God is that he doesn’t let us know what’s coming! God mercifully withholds that information, because sometimes it’s probably even scarier than our worries. He withholds what we don’t need to know because he cares for us and loves us.

Another beautiful characteristic of God in this passage is that he’s an artist. Our family has had two wonderful opportunities this summer to see up close some of the more beautiful parts of God’s creation. Earlier in the summer we got a chance to be in Hawaii. Can there be anything as absolutely, stunningly beautiful as a Maui sunset painted across the sky? And then last week we were at Camp PBC at the foot of the incredible Mt. Shasta, the top of which was still covered with snow. Some look at Mt. Shasta and see the profile of Mother Earth, a pregnant woman, lying on her back. But I see in the wonder of that incredible beauty the fingerprint of God.

Yet Jesus says you are more beautiful than that! You are a creation of the master Artist himself. God has fashioned you. Like the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the beauty of his artistry can sometimes be hidden under a buildup of dirt. But he’s the master art restorer as well! He wants to clean all that off and allow the beauty of his creation to shine forth.

That’s the kind of God we serve. God invites us to see him in all his glory, and that’s what enables us to stop

worrying and trust him.

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