

SEEK FIRST

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 6:25–34
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Matthew 6:25–34

In the summer of 1985, I lost a job. I was not happy about losing the job, but I was happy about the timing. I had always wanted to visit Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, mostly for the fishing, so I set out, all by myself, leaving my roommates in San Jose for a six-week camping and fishing trip. I sought not only to angle for trout; I sought also to meet with God.

Off and on during the trip, I felt anxious about my unemployed state. One day, after an afternoon of fishing, I lay down for a nap on the banks of the Madison River in Montana.

Multiple surveys indicate that people in our country are more anxious than they used to be. In a poll conducted by the American Psychiatric Association in 2018, 39 percent of Americans said they were more anxious than they were the previous year. Safety, health, and finances were the greatest sources of anxiety.¹

In a poll released earlier this month, 67 percent of respondents said they are “unhappy or worried about changes happening in the Bay Area,” up from 10 percent in 2016. Respondents especially expressed concerns about traffic, the cost of living, and homelessness.²

Three times in Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus tells us “do not be anxious.” But it looks as if he doesn’t think we can simply hear those words and follow them. Otherwise, why would he feel the need not only to repeat those words but also to surround them with so many other words? Let’s consider carefully not only the instruction “do not be anxious” but also the surrounding words. Maybe by the end, we’ll be a little less anxious.

Jesus not only instructs us not to be anxious, but he also asks us questions. Have you ever noticed in the gospels that Jesus asks a lot of questions? In these verses, he asks five questions. Answering the questions may help us diagnose our anxiety so that Jesus can treat it. If someone asks you a question, you have to come up with words to answer the question. Words unlock feelings. Forming words to express your feelings can tell you how you feel.

Moreover, Jesus also instructs us to do two things that are easily doable before finally telling us what to do instead of worrying.

Do not be anxious about your life

Matthew 6:25:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

Jesus’ last words in Matthew 6:24 (“You cannot serve God and money”) lead into the oft-repeated command in verses 25-34 (“do not be anxious”). Therefore, because you cannot serve God and money, serve God. As we shall see, if we serve God, we won’t need to worry so much about money, not to mention food, drink, and clothing. Of course, in our world, we mostly need money to obtain food, drink, and clothing.

Verse 25 introduces the rest of the passage. The word “life” here refers to the basic necessities we need for life, such as food, drink, and clothing. Jesus was speaking to people who weren’t so much concerned about what they would eat or drink or wear but whether they would such necessities. Even so, Jesus told them to not be anxious about such things. Jesus tells us not to be anxious about such things either.

Many of us aren’t so much anxious about whether we will have food, drink, and clothing and therefore feel confident that our basic needs will be met. That doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re not anxious about food, drink, and clothing. All sorts of concerns gather these days around such matters.

Question 1: “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Theologically, the answer is yes, but how would you answer the question personally? Some of us obsess about food and clothing as if our lives depended on the issues we’ve attached to food and clothing. Some advertising would suggest that a

meaningful life depends on certain food and certain clothing.³

If we're anxious, Jesus tells us to learn from creation.

Look at the birds

Matthew 6:26-27:

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

Jesus wants us to learn from birds. They don't plant seeds, harvest food, or store food for the future, yet they don't lack for food each day. They're far from inactive, of course, but as they actively look for food, they find food. Then, not having recourse to a pantry, they get up and do it again. All this is not by accident; Jesus says: “your heavenly Father feeds them.” Jesus doesn't say “their” heavenly Father feeds them; he says “your” heavenly Father feeds them, which implies that he cares more about you than he does about birds.

Are you obsessing about food: what to eat, how much to eat, whether to eat, whether to eat in or eat out, where to eat out, who to eat with?

Question 2: “Are you not of more value than they?” Theologically, the answer is yes, you're more valuable than birds, but how would you answer the question personally?

Question 3: “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” Theologically, the answer is no one, but how would you answer the question personally? Do you think you can lengthen your life, or even improve it, by being anxious, by worrying constantly about the future?

First easily doable command: “Look at the birds of the air . . .” Now there's a command we can obey. How difficult is it to look at birds?

Spend some time looking at birds. Maybe birds can teach you a few things. But maybe simply looking at birds will do you some good. Instead of worrying about whatever you're worrying about, take a break and watch some birds for five minutes.

If we're anxious, Jesus tells us to learn from birds. Next he tells us to learn from another aspect of creation.

Observe the flowers

Matthew 6:28-30:

“And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

Question 4: “And why are you anxious about clothing?” Jesus seems to assume that his first hearers were anxious about clothing, but if in fact, you're anxious about clothing, how would you answer the question? Are you obsessing about clothes: the cost of clothes, where to buy clothes, when to buy clothes, missing the best deals, what's in style and out of style, what looks good or doesn't look good on you? If you're anxious about clothing, why are you anxious?

Jesus wants us to learn from the birds of the air; he also wants us to learn from the lilies of the field—that is, wildflowers. Unlike birds, which forage for food, flowers are inactive: they don't forage for clothing. They're just beautiful, and they're beautiful, even more beautiful than king Solomon when he was clothed in his royal garb because God made them that way.

Second easily doable command: “Consider the lilies of the field . . .” The word translated “consider” can also be translated “observe.” It can mean to learn by observing. Here's another command we can obey. How difficult is it to observe flowers? Jesus told us to look at birds; now, he tells us to observe flowers.

Spend some time observing flowers. Maybe flowers can teach you a few things. Maybe simply observing flowers will do you some good. Instead of worrying about whatever you're worrying about, take a break and observe some flowers for five minutes.

At the very least, looking at birds and observing flowers will take your mind off what you're worrying about. Who knows, maybe after a while, you'll get into it a little bit and want to keep looking and observing. Who knows, maybe looking at birds and observing flowers will open you up in a new way to the wonder of creation and the wonder of the creator.

David spent some time looking at and observing creation and ended up penning a masterpiece, Psalm 8, which begins and ends with these words: “O Lord, our Lord, / how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Or listen to the poet William Blake:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour⁴*

Question 5: “But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” Theologically, the answer is yes, but how would you answer the question personally? The question assumes that you, being eternal, are more valuable to God than flowers or grass, which are temporary, but is that what you believe?

Have the five questions that Jesus asked surfaced anything for you? Shown you that you’re anxious? Shown you why you’re anxious? If so, perhaps paying close attention to Jesus’ other words in this passage can help you.

Some of us, for whatever reason, don’t think we’re very valuable. A popular worldview has it that birds, flowers, and humans evolved by chance, apart from a creator, and that they are equally valuable. Or, let’s face it, if everything evolved apart from a creator, then everything is equally worthless. Ah, but if we’ve been created by a loving God, and if he sent his Son to die for us, what does that say about our value?

Next, Jesus helps us with our anxiety by telling us what God knows.

Do not be anxious

Matthew 6:31-32:

“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.”

For the second time, Jesus tells us “do not be anxious.” Now, though, after hearing five questions and two easily doable commands, perhaps we’re ready to hear the words in a new way. After all, the word “therefore” draws an inference from what Jesus said previously.

Gentiles—that is, those who don’t believe in the God of Israel—are anxious about food, drink, and clothing because they don’t trust that their gods can or will provide for them. They, therefore “seek after,” in an intense way, such necessities. Many people in our world do the same. As we have seen, many other people who feel confident that they’ll have enough to eat, drink, and wear obsess about such matters in other ways.

Just before Jesus instructed us in prayer, he told us that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). Now Jesus says that our heavenly Father knows that we need food, drink, and clothing. Jesus believes that if our heavenly Father knows what we need, we don’t need to be anxious about such things.

Jesus has already told us two things to do instead of worrying. He has told us to look at birds, and he’s told us to observe flowers. If we look at birds and observe flowers more, maybe we’ll worry less. Is there anything else we can do?

So often in the Scriptures, when we’re told to stop doing what’s bad for us, we’re also told to start doing what’s good for us. There’s a reason we’re doing what’s bad for us: we think it’s good for us. We worry because we believe that worrying is accomplishing something. We worry about the future because we believe that worrying about the future makes us better prepared for the future.

So, what should we do instead of worrying about the future?

Seek first

Matthew 6:33:

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

To seek the kingdom of God is to seek the king of the kingdom, who is Christ. To seek the righteousness of God is to seek the ways of Christ. Seek to know Christ, and seek to know the ways of Christ.

To me, it is fascinating, and the end quite exciting, that Jesus encourages us to “seek.” He doesn’t encourage us to find. If we seek Christ and his ways, we will find what we need to find when we need to find it—in order to continue seeking (Matthew 7:7-8). Make a quest. Follow a quest. Seek to know Christ and his ways. There’s always more to know, more to find. Especially, there’s

always more to appreciate about what we already know, what we've already found. Where will the quest lead us?

In the musical *Man of La Mancha*, Aldonza warns the mad knight, Don Quixote, that if he keeps going the way he's going, "your head is going to end up a stranger to your neck."

Don Quixote: "That doesn't mater."

Aldonza: "What does?"

Don Quixote: "Only that I follow my quest."

Yes, follow your quest: seek Christ and his ways. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. That's what matters.

Jesus' instruction is consistent with his earlier instruction to look at the birds and to observe the flowers. We're looking. We're observing. We're seeking. Perhaps, then, as we look at the flowers and observe the birds, we're seeking Christ and his ways. Look. Observe. Seek.

Then what?

Seek Christ and seek his ways, and then what? In Matthew 7:7-8, seek and you will find. But that's not what Jesus says here. He says seek, and "all these things"—basic necessities such as food, drink, and clothing—"will be added to you."

They're needs, of course, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them, but they're secondary needs. The greater need is to seek Christ and his ways, even if it doesn't feel like a need. First, we should seek Christ and his ways, and second, we should trust God to meet our secondary needs. As Keith Green sings, "He'll take care of the rest." Our heavenly Father will meet our secondary needs so that we can continue pursuing the primary need, which is to seek Christ and his ways.

If we seek Christ and his ways, our Father will meet our secondary needs until such time as he calls us home. Yes, some earnest believers who seek Christ and the ways of Christ starve to death, die of dehydration, and freeze to death, but such deaths do not negate the promises of Jesus here. All of us who seek the kingdom will have what we need for as long as the Father deems that we need it. And when we die, however, we die to the glory of God.

One of the best ways to seek to know Christ and the ways of Christ is to spend time with him in the gospels, which is, of course, what we've been doing for the past few months in the Sermon on the Mount.

For me, each biblical text presents the possibility of a quest. What will I find? Will what I find change me in any way? When I approach the text for the purpose of preaching it, I don't know what will emerge, which makes for an exciting—and sometimes frightening—quest. With this sermon, I've done something I've never done before: I simply let Jesus ask his questions.

Another way to seek to know Christ and his ways is to get close to a few people who are doing such and see what you can pick up. Oftentimes, what you pick up is simply a way of being.

Yes, but finally, what about tomorrow? If we're worried, we're worried about the future, aren't we?

Do not be anxious about tomorrow

Matthew 6:34:

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

For a third time, Jesus tells us "do not be anxious." Again, he prefaces the instruction with the word "therefore." Therefore, in light of everything that Jesus has said in Matthew 6:25-33, do not be anxious. Perhaps, hearing the words for a third time, we're ready to hear them yet again in a new way.

Now, Jesus doesn't say "do not be anxious" about your life or about food, drink, or clothing; he says do not be anxious about "tomorrow." If we're anxious, we're usually anxious for the future, about what may or may not happen in the future, aren't we? If we worry about the future, we worry in order to secure the future, don't we?

What does Jesus say about tomorrow? "[T]omorrow will be anxious for itself." Obviously, he's speaking figuratively, for how can a day be anxious? Jesus is saying that tomorrow's troubles are not our responsibility; they're tomorrow's responsibility, so to speak. Tomorrow's troubles may never come to pass, anyway, so why worry about them? How many times have you worried about what might happen and what might happen never happened? Too many to count, probably.

If we really want to be anxious, well, we have quite enough to be anxious about today, don't we? Don't make things worse by also worrying about what may or may not happen tomorrow. You cannot secure the future by worrying about it, by thinking through every possible

scenario so that you're prepared for every possible scenario, not least because the possible scenarios are endless. Such worrying is more likely to shorten your life than lengthen it.

The trouble that could cause us anxiety today is enough for us to deal with. And how do we deal with it? Seek Christ and his ways. And maybe look at a few birds and observe a few flowers. As for tomorrow? Listen to the hymn writer:

And because he lives
I can face tomorrow
Because he lives
All fear is gone
Because I know he holds the future
And life is worth the living
Just because he lives

Waking up

When I woke up from my nap on the banks of the Madison River, I opened my eyes, and I noticed the grass in front of me, waving in the breeze. Next, I noticed some birds flying just above the grass. And I immediately remembered that each had a place in the Sermon on the Mount.

Well, I was anxious about my life because I was unemployed and I didn't know what to do. What should I do? Maybe I should look at the birds of the air and observe the flowers of the field. Oh, that's what I was doing, unbidden. What do I learn from the birds and the flowers? I learn that my heavenly Father feeds them and clothes them—and that I am worth more than birds of the air and flowers of the field. I learn that the Father will give me what I need, today and tomorrow, and that what I need to do is seek him.

I woke up in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount!

There is too much to tell in this writing, but a few months after I returned to the Bay Area, a door opened for a newspaper job in the East Bay, which got me involved in a church, where I started studying the Scriptures, leading Bible studies, and shepherding high school and college students, which opened another door, which took me back to Idaho for three years of theological and ministerial training, which opened

another door, which took me back to the Bay Area to become a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church.

Seek to know Christ. Seek to know the ways of Christ. He'll take care of the rest.

Endnotes

- 1 "Americans Say They Are More Anxious Than a Year Ago; Baby Boomers Report Greatest Increase in Anxiety," *American Psychiatric Association* (May 7, 2018), www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/americans-say-they-are-more-anxious-than-a-year-ago-baby-boomers-report-greatest-increase-in-anxiety.
- 2 Marisa Kendall, "Residents increasingly unhappy with Bay Area life, new poll finds," *San Jose Mercury News* (December 4, 2019), www.mercurynews.com/2019/12/04/residents-increasingly-are-unhappy-with-bay-area-life-new-poll-finds/.
- 3 To a certain extent, Jesus has already answered the question when he told the devil, "Man shall not live by bread alone, / but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).
- 4 William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *Poets of the English Language* (New York: Viking Press, 1950)..