

Antidote for Worry

Matthew 6:25-33

Guest Preacher: Rev. Dr. Peter James - Senior Pastor, Vienna Presbyterian Church

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I bring you greetings from Vienna Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia. Perhaps you've heard of Vienna, Virginia – it is at the end of the Orange Line on the METRO, if you've ever traveled that far! I share a long-time friendship with Gareth Icenogle, your pastor here; in fact, Gareth and I met each other 20 years ago, this year. We belong to a Covenant Group of pastors – about 40 of us, that meet together once a year – to pray for each other, to support each other, and to encourage each other in faith. So we have become good friends. This church, National Presbyterian Church and Vienna Presbyterian Church, share a lot of things in common. Not only do we share our association with the PC(USA) denomination, but we share a lot of similar passions, in terms of exalting Jesus Christ as Lord; and the Scriptures as authoritative; and everyone is called to discipleship. So it is a pleasure to be with you today. Let's join our hearts together in prayer. May, O Lord, the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Worry. We all do it. I don't know anyone that doesn't worry. Some of us do our worrying on the outside. Some of us do our worrying on the inside. Parents worry about their children. Children worry about their parents. You might worry about your job, your home, your family, your friends—you name it. Yesterday, I noticed in the Washington Post, in the "Style" section, an article called "The U.S. of Anxiety." And the article suggested that, post-9/11, we live today, in America, in a culture of fear. And one of the things I've noticed about fear is the tendency of fear to feed on itself. Fear and anxiety metastasize and spread everywhere. Well, there's no end of things today in our culture that we are anxious about: the gas crisis; global warming; the economy; identity theft. Why, just this week, there was another thing for you to be anxious about: those evil chemicals that are in plastic water bottles! Now we're to worry about those things. And we got into this situation in the first place because of the dangers of tap water, which has spawned a multi-million dollar industry of bottled waters that perhaps now have chemicals in it.

My friends... brothers and sisters... we need to stop the madness and replace fear and anxiety with faith. And Jesus, today, speaks a redemptive word into our situation. I invite you to turn with me to Matthew, chapter 6, if you brought your Bible from home. I think there are Bibles in the pews; particularly those of you who are visual learners, you might want to see the passage. And others of you who are auditory learners – you can just listen along (Matthew 6:25-34). Now one of the things I notice immediately, in this passage, is that three times in a matter of ten verses, Jesus instructs us not to worry. Verse 25: "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." Then go to the middle of the passage— verse 31: "Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" And then the end of the passage, verse 34: "So, do not worry about tomorrow." In other words, in the beginning, and the middle, and the end of the passage, Jesus instructs us not to give ourselves to undue worry. There is more to life, my friends, than eating right and dressing well. Jesus goes on to give us two examples in this passage of what he means by needless worry (look at verse 26): "Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap or gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" Some of you are bird watchers. Perhaps when you retrieved the newspaper today, you heard this cacophony of sound— the birds. And Jesus is saying to us: let the birds be our teachers. What do they teach us? Now, Jesus, here, is not talking about idleness— he's talking about worry. And as far as birds are concerned— they gather in nests and forage for food, but they don't worry about it. And they go about their business unconsciously living in God's world. They are care-free in God's care.

The original Greek word for worry comes from a Middle English word which means "to strangle." That's what worry does, my friends—it strangles us. Now, there's nothing wrong with caring about something. What worry is, is to become consumed with care. And there's a world of difference between caring about something and becoming consumed with care. Caring about something causes us to take constructive action; but worry disables us.

Well then, Jesus goes on and gives us another example; and in this open-air sanctuary I can imagine Jesus saying, "Look, at the lilies of the field... I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." You know, Solomon can wear regal ware, but only God can make a flower. How do flowers grow? They just grow— they don't worry about it. They instinctively grow; they instinctively draw nutrients and food from the soil. Do you see? Jesus is saying: if birds don't worry and flowers don't worry, neither should we. Verse 30: "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

Jesus, I see in this passage, is giving us three reasons not to worry. First, it's unnecessary; it's pointless. It gives us something to do, I suppose, but that's sort of like sitting in a rocking chair—you don't go anywhere, but it gives you something to do. Worry gives you something to do, but it's unnecessary; it's pointless. It has been said that 45% of what we worry about never take place; and 25% of the things we worry about have already taken place. Do the math! So why are we worrying about things that may not happen? And why are we giving ourselves to yesterday's concerns, Jesus asks? Second, it's unproductive. Verse 27: "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?" Worrying doesn't add to your life; it actually subtracts from it. You know, the little phrase we often recite: "I'm worried sick" is truer than we might realize. I mean, think of the toll worry exacts on us: headache; backache; heartache; stomach ache; high blood pressure; you name it.

Worry is unnecessary; it's unproductive; and, if I might say so, it's un-Christian. It is an affront to God. It's practical atheism. Verse 32: the word "Gentile" here is a code word for those who have not yet believed in Jesus: "For the Gentiles run after all these things."

In preparing for this sermon, I happened to notice a commentary by F. D. Bruner. F. D. Bruner, for many years, was a missionary in the Philippines. And in his commentary, he writes this: "As a former missionary to the Philippines, I was concerned about how to

preach this text to the poor. Isn't it cruel to tell the poor not to be anxious about getting enough to eat or wear? Could we recite Jesus' admonition about worry to those who are suffering from famine in Africa?" Well, he goes on to write that Jesus doesn't call us to remain indifferent to the poor; his whole ministry teaches us otherwise. Rather, these questions: "What shall I eat?" "What shall I drink?" "What shall I wear?"—they're all self-serving questions. And Jesus calls us to step out of ourselves and work for the kingdom of God. Well, that's why I think the key to this whole passage is verse 33: "But strive..." (or alternatively, 'seek') "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." At the church I serve in Vienna, I, with others, have been preaching a sermon series on the kingdom of God. We're now two-and-a-half months into preaching on the kingdom of God. And we've been teaching that the kingdom of God is not only a place believers go when they die. "The kingdom of God has come near" Jesus said. (Mark 1.14-15). And what we're talking about here in Scripture are not 'feel good' promises for the next life only; but the kingdom of God is about this life... and your life.

Now, a kingdom is simply a realm that is uniquely your own. Let me illustrate it this way: my kingdom is 1881 Cold Creek Court in Vienna, Virginia; that's where I live. And that's my kingdom; that's my realm because I have, at least, some say over what takes place there. I'm a co-regent with my wife, Chris. We have one lone subject in our kingdom—and that's a cat named "Eve." Now, sometimes Eve listens to us; most of the time she doesn't. Now, we used to have two other relatively loyal subjects in that kingdom—a son, Andrew, and a daughter, Emily; but now they've gone on to establish kingdoms of their own.

Now, the only other kingdom I have is 124 Park Street, N.E. in Vienna, Virginia; that's the church where I serve as pastor. Now there are a few more members of this kingdom; and it's my 'kingdom,' because I have at least some say over what takes place there. But in truth, many of my subjects are like my cat, Eve—sometimes they listen to me; sometimes they don't. That's pretty much the extent of my kingdom. That's where I live and work; that's my realm. You have a realm where you live. You have a kingdom where you work. And these are little kingdoms, you understand. Gareth reminded us, from the outset of worship today, that there's a bigger kingdom out there. And it's a kingdom where "earth is His throne and heaven, His footstool." (Isaiah 66.1) This is an enormous kingdom that is coming. And God calls you to be a part of it—a bigger kingdom.

Now, I'll tell you that this is a radically-different kingdom than any other kingdom you're a part of. Because everything is upside down in this kingdom—because the last go first, and the first go last. And Jesus says, 'if someone strikes you on the right cheek, you offer him your left.' What kind of kingdom is that? Do you understand that this is not a kingdom that's brought about by military armies and marching soldiers? It's a kingdom where, if you hoard your life, you lose it. But Jesus says, 'if you lose your life for my sake and Gospel, you find it.' What kind of kingdom is that? It's the kingdom of God. It's the kingdom Jesus is bringing near; and he's calling you to be a part of it today. And it's a kingdom where Jesus is God's co-regent. When the parents of baptism said, "we profess Jesus as our Lord and Savior," they're acknowledging Jesus is Lord of this kingdom. And he's not just a religious Lord. I know it looks like that sometimes; but there will come a day when every political power and every person shall kneel to Jesus as Lord.

Alright, well then, "seek first the kingdom." Seek first the kingdom. "Seek first" means to make it your first priority. "Seek first" is present-imperative (that's the tense), which means we're to 'keep on seeking' the kingdom as our first priority.

Well then, the passage closes with these words in verse 34: "So, do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." It's enough. Now this doesn't mean, while you cannot worry about tomorrow, today... you can worry about it, tomorrow. What it means is: if today is the only day we have, then tomorrow, as it were, never comes. And so, we're free. We're free to live in today, because that's the day we have.

O.K.—the antidote of worry, my friends, is trust. Trust belongs to the kingdom of God; worry belongs to the kingdoms of this world—the kingdoms that are falling away. Verse 30: "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" Now this passage that was read for us, and I'm preaching on now, is part of what's called the "Sermon on the Mount." And it's a sermon Jesus gives; it's an open-air sermon. And earlier in the chapter, you might look at verses 5 to 15, Jesus gives instructions on prayer. And essentially then, verse 11, one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." What Jesus is doing here is amplifying what he means when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Can we not trust God for the things we pray for?

About twenty years, or so, ago, Bobby McFerrin, a jazz singer, had his one and only hit song that went to the top of the billboard charts. In 1988, some of you remember, it was the hit song of the year in the Grammy awards. It was distinctive because it was the first acoustical song to be so honored. It's only his voice; he sang it in eight different layers, as it were, and put it together. And there's this little refrain that repeats to the song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." That's the song. And Jesus, here, is taking it a step farther: Don't worry—trust.

Now perhaps, as I've been preaching today, something is coming to the surface for you, that concerns you, where you're full of care. And the invitation of Jesus today is to lay it down. It may be your job: about finding a job; about finding another job; about keeping your job; about terminating your job; about going into retirement. It might be your school: your grades; your friends; getting into the right college or graduate school. It might be your housing: about moving out of the house, maybe into an apartment; buying a condo; selling a condo; buying a house; selling a house; downsizing. It might be about this church. Some of you are reading the consultant report of this church and you're all stirred up about the future of this church; its leadership; its Session. Some of you worry about the people in your life: the person sitting next to you—wife; husband; child; aging parent; friend; co-worker. Are you worried about your life? Your weight? Your health? Your future? I think I've just about covered it. The admonition of Jesus: don't worry, trust. Trust.

I invite you, before you leave here today, to leave the things you worry about, in this sanctuary—that your remaining act of worship is to simply give them over to God. You actually leave them here in the sanctuary. And, if you find, during this week, you must worry about them again, then we give you permission to come back into the sanctuary this week and take on your worry again, and worry about it some more. But if not, then you leave it to God's safe-keeping. Don't worry; trust.

Lord, things are coming to mind and to our hearts that worry us. And it may be about our school, our job, our home, our friends, our life, our church, our housing. Lord, whatever gives us cause for worry, we entrust to your holy mercy. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.