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WHAT THE BIRDS TEACH

Matthew 6:25-34

In 1876, to celebrate the 100th birthday of our country there was an event in Philadelphia called the Philadelphia Centennial Celebration. An ornamental vine from Japan was introduced there and promoted as a wonderful plant with sweet smelling blossoms. The federal government later began touting this plant as a great defense against soil erosion. It also was good, the government said, for building up depleted soil. It was planted all across the south east of the United States. The plant is kudzu. It turns out it is ridiculously fast growing. It can grow as much as a foot a day. It also has proven to be one of the most destructive invasive species on the planet. It rapidly grows over native trees and plants, covering them completely, cutting them off from sunlight, and completely destroying them. It is now growing out of control in many parts of the US.

There is something I think of as spiritual kudzu. It is invasive, grows out of control and chokes the spiritual life out of people. This is some dangerous stuff. The invasive species I refer to is stress. Comedian Lily Tomlin said, “Reality is the leading cause of stress among those who are in touch with it.” 60% of Americans say they feel stressed on a daily basis. That’s not surprising when people are using their MasterCard to pay their Visa bill and using their Discover card to pay the MasterCard. In many families in these hectic days they are so busy that no one has the time to wait for the microwave to heat up the TV dinner. One guitar said to another guitar that was very stressed, “Hey, man, don’t fret.” We’ve been looking at some of the hard things we have to deal with to survive. One of them is stress. To deal with stress we need something better than “don’t fret.” Today we’re going to learn about this spiritual kudzu, and see what we can do to combat it. Let’s look at Matthew 6:25-34.

JESUS COMMANDED US TO NOT BE STRESSED

Jesus tells us here to not worry or be anxious. When we say we are stressed what we mean is we are anxious or worried about something. We are worried about what might happen to us, or we are anxious because something might not go the way we want. Jesus tells us not to do that in no uncertain terms. The grammar is very clear. The statement “Do not worry” is a command. When we are stressed, when we worry, we are disobeying this command.

Philippians 4:6-7 says much the same thing. It tells us to be anxious for nothing. Surely that must mean nothing in the generic, broad sense, like mostly don’t be anxious, except for some really big things, right? Like they said they need to do a biopsy, and they’ve done that, so now you’re waiting for the result. It’s got to be all right to be anxious about that because anybody who is human would be anxious in that situation, right?

Jesus said do not worry, period. Paul wrote that we should be anxious for nothing. By nothing he meant…nothing. Zero. No exceptions, no reserve clauses. Don’t stress ever about anything. The problem is, we do stress. Everybody does. A *New York Post* article in December, 2019 said that Americans are more stressed than ever before, and are some of the most stressed, anxious people in the entire world! That was before the pandemic overwhelmed our nation. Do you suppose people have gotten less stressed since then? Americans, before the pandemic, spent $300 billion per year trying to relieve stress! Anxiety and stress are an epidemic all on their own.

But of all the things Jesus could give us commands about, why would he make an issue of worry and stress? It is not hard to understand commands about loving God and worshiping him, about loving others, treating them with kindness and gentleness, about being morally upright people and having integrity. But it doesn’t seem like stress has anything moral at stake. Why would Jesus discuss this at some length in what would become his most famous sermon and seem to put an emphasis on it? I guess you could ask why we should worry about worrying?

First, because our stressing and being anxious does not honor God. Jesus said the greatest commandment, the most important thing we must do, is to love God with all our heart, soul and strength. Putting God first is the highest of all priorities. Without preaching a sermon about it, I will remind you that this is so because all good flows out of honoring God first, and all evil flows out of not honoring God first. It is the watershed issue in all of life, beginning with our individual life.

When we are stressed, when we become anxious, what are we saying? Do you parents remember when your teenage child had his or her learner’s permit to drive? You were in the car with your not yet 16 year old child as he or she was driving. How did you feel? I remember actually stomping on a brake pedal that wasn’t there because I was in the passenger seat, but my automatic reaction was to slow the car down or stop it. If the teenager senses how tense you are and asks, “Why are you so stressed? Don’t you trust me?” the honest answer is, “Absolutely not.”

The parent’s lack of confidence and trust in the teenager is the cause of the stress and anxiety. Our stress and anxiety say the same thing about God. It is us stomping on a non existent brake pedal because we think God is steering us right into a wreck. He says to us, “Why are you so stressed? Don’t you trust me?” The honest answer is, “Absolutely not.” Our stress says that God is not to be trusted. It says that maybe God is not good, or maybe he doesn’t love us and just doesn’t care about what happens to us. It’s either that or God is unable to do anything substantive about the situation. Whichever it is, God is most assuredly not honored by that. Our lack of trust is the source of great evil. Go back and read Romans 1 and you will see in that passage that failing to honor God for who he is, is the headwaters of the river of evil that flows through the human race.

The second reason why Jesus made a big deal out of stressing is that God loves us and wants what is best for us. Here’s a news flash for you, anxiety and worry are not good for us. I bet you already knew that, but it is important to reiterate it. Our little grandson, Wesley, who is ridiculously cute, loves to explore the world. To him, everything he sees is new and wondrous. He loves to take walks so he can see and touch all these wonders. Recently when Laurie was taking him for walks on a couple of occasions, he decided he wanted to explore new territory. What drew him was that dark looking area between the sidewalks. Adults call a street. Laurie had to repeatedly steer him away and tell him the street was not for him to walk in. Why would she be so narrow minded and restrictive? It looked appealing to him. She did it because she loves him, and she knows if he gets it in his mind that he can run out into the street whenever he feels like it, there is a chance something terrible could happen to him.

That is part of why God tells us not to worry and stress. It is because there is more than a chance that something terrible will happen to us when we do worry and stress, it is a certainty. You can find many examples in the Bible of occasions when God’s people compromised and made bad choices because they worried. Our stress tends to breed compromise and bad choices. When Abraham and Sarah were waiting for a promised son to finally show up, they began to think God wasn’t going to come through and it was up to them to do something about it. They couldn’t trust him to fulfill his promise. So they concocted the plan to have Abraham get Sarah’s servant pregnant. It turned out to be a really bad plan that is bearing terrible fruit even to this day.

It also turns out that stress and worry are bad for our health. You already knew that from having a sleepless night when you were stressing over something. It does not produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness or any other fruit of the Spirit. Stress harms us physically. Have you heard of microglia cells? They are cells that reside in your brain. They are part of your brain’s immune system. They constantly scavenge for plaques, unused or damaged synapses and infectious agents. They chop them up and discard them. They are a crucial part of healthy brain function. When we are stressed over a period of time it causes an increase in cortisol, among other things, and cortisol tends to make the microglia cells overly sensitive and overactive. They begin attacking healthy synapses, which are crucial for the necessary functions of your brain. Researchers have identified this as the cause of “covid brain,” people feeling like they’re in a fog during this pandemic. The stress is damaging their ability to think clearly. That is what stress does to us, among many other things.

Here are just a few of the things prolonged stress does to us. It causes inflammation, leads to increased risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease, suppresses our immune system, causes muscle and joint pain, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure, headache, fatigue and can even cause loss of teeth. To cap it all off, stress, as I said, causes an increase in cortisol, which is a big factor in increased belly fat. So stress makes us sick, fat, stupid and toothless. Beginning to see why Jesus thought it is a bad idea?

JESUS SHOWED US HOW TO NOT BE STRESSED

The question is how do we deal with stress? One person suggested chewing gum. Reportedly that does lower cortisol levels. Another person suggested filling out your tax forms using Roman numerals, but that seems stressful to me. Fortunately Jesus has some much more helpful instruction for us.

**Remember the Father’s work**

One of the things I’ve always loved about Jesus’ style of teaching is he used lots of illustrations. In this passage he used some that begin with people’s most basic stresses. We find a wide variety of things to stress over, ranging from the miniscule and trivial, to the biggest and most important matters in our lives. But for many of Jesus’ listeners the basic issues of life took precedence. They stressed over just having food to eat, clothes to wear and a roof over their heads. They weren’t real concerned with getting a promotion at work, how their investments were doing, getting their kids into the right school. They just wanted to survive. That’s what Jesus focused on. Those basic issues serve as models for everything we might stress about. These are the most important things. If God can handle them, then he can handle those things that are of much less importance.

Jesus used birds as an illustration. One day as I was working on this talk, I got to spend some time with little Wesley, our grandson. We went out in his family’s backyard to explore, which, as I said, he loves to do. It is spring, and out in the yard I was struck with the proliferation of bird songs. Wesley and I loved hearing all those birds singing their different tunes. It hit me, none of the birds seemed stressed. It was the middle of the morning and they weren’t working. They weren’t slaving away, trying to find food. They were sitting in the trees chirping away, flitting from one tree to another. They just seemed to be enjoying a beautiful spring day. I asked, “Shouldn’t you be stocking up on food while the weather was good?” They paid no attention at all.

Jesus said in verse 26, “They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” Wait, they don’t work or plan for the future, and God feeds them anyway? That sounds like a welfare state to me. How are you going to get anybody to work if that’s the deal? Jesus wasn’t saying we shouldn’t work. He was saying we shouldn’t stress like it’s all up to us.

Someone might say, “Yeah, great. If what you want to eat is bird seed and worms, trusting God is a good plan. But personally, I’d like to aim for a little better cuisine.” You need to pay attention to the end of verse 26. “Are you not much more valuable than they?” He implies a yes answer to that question. God gives birds what they need to live, you matter much more to him that birds do, so he will give you what you need to live as well.

He followed that up with the clothing issue. Look at the flowers in the field. They are gorgeous, aren’t they? We have some even in our tiny excuse for a back yard that are spectacularly beautiful. Jesus says of them in verse 28, “They do not labor or spin.” There’s that thing of not working again. They just do what flowers do, which is nothing, and God makes them gorgeous.

Hey, I love this passage. What I’m taking from it is that I don’t have to work. I can just be what I am, the way the birds are birds and the flowers are flowers, and God will give me everything I need. Um, maybe you’re missing the point. Jesus wasn’t talking about work. In other places the Bible makes it clear we need to work. He was talking about worrying, stressing. What we need to do is to be faithful. Work as God has given us to do within his priorities, then trust that he will make sure we get what we need. One man said, “What God supplies is enough.” Where have I heard that before? That’s the message. Be faithful to be and do what God has made you to be and do, then relax, trusting that God will supply what you need.

The heart of the matter shows up in verse 30. Jesus addressed his listeners as “You of little faith.” That is the bottom line. It is all about faith. Do we believe God will keep his promise and supply what we need, no matter what it is? When we stress, when we worry, we are saying, “No, I don’t think he will. So I have to fix the problem.”

Much of our stress stems from two things. One is uncertainty. Research shows that uncertainty creates a great deal of anxiety in people. Unfortunately, everything in the future is uncertain. Life is uncertain. The pandemic has certainly reminded us of that. The other factor in our stress is lack of control. Dr. Carol North, professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis, says, “people become more upset with events over which they have no control.” Here’s the thing: our lives are grounded in one certainty. God is in control and his purposes will be accomplished. The more we trust in his purposes, his plan, his control and his certain sovereignty, the more we can have peace and not stress.

Philosopher Andrew Bernstein said, “Stress doesn’t come from what’s going on in your life. It comes from your thoughts about what is going on.” If we can think about what’s going on from God’s perspective, believing that he really will take care of us, then we will be much less stressed.

**Remember how effective stressing is**

Verse 27 asks a profound question. “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” A lot of people answer that saying, “Yes, I think I can. If I eat only a plant based diet of organic foods, and I exercise religiously and vigorously, avoid putting anything in my body that might pollute it, I think I can add even years to my life.” But is that true? It is true that if you take care of yourself, eat right, exercise, do all the right things, you have a chance of having a longer, healthier life. But it is no guarantee of that. We all know of instances of people who have done all those healthy things, who still died at an unexpectedly early age.

But even that is not really the point. He’s not discussing taking actions that might make you healthier. He’s talking about worrying, about being stressed. Can that add hours, days, years to your life? No, in fact, it is likely to do just the opposite. It will contribute to damaging your health and might well shorten your life.

The point here is something we all know but forget. Our worrying and being stressed, doesn’t change or improve anything. Years ago I went through a prolonged episode where I had several symptoms that seemed neurological. The medical folks put me through innumerable tests with no clear answers. Finally, one doctor really helped. He wrote out a prescription for me, something for me to do at least 4 times a day. The prescription was to worry about the problem. It was exactly what I needed. I began diligently worrying about the symptoms, and they soon began improving dramatically. Eventually it cured them completely.

Do you believe that? I hope you don’t, because that is absolutely not true. Worrying doesn’t help anything. Stressing might have been a contributing cause, so more stressing only made it a little worse and possibly prolonged the problem. Getting ourselves anxious about something will never affect the thing itself in any positive way, and may affect us negatively. Let me say this very clearly. You heard it from Jesus himself, so you can take that to the bank. Our being anxious will never help resolve any problem.

I know, we have a tendency to start stressing over the fact that we are stressing over something, putting even more pressure on ourselves. That is not helpful at all, so instead of doing that, shift your focus. Give yourself something else to think about, which is the next point.

**Focus on God’s Kingdom**

Jesus tells us people are obsessed with the things of this world. They are all about what we will eat, what we will wear, what kind of success we will have, how we can be healthy, how we can protect ourselves and promote ourselves. Those obsessions actually eat them alive. They fill their hearts with worry and anxiety and stress. He says we should not do that.

Instead, Jesus said, remember that the Father knows you need these things. So let him take care of all that. Meanwhile, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Jesus promised that God will give you the things you need in this world. I repeat, he promised this. Do you think he was wrong? Or was he lying? If he was telling the truth, then what are you worried about?

If all you do is say, “Don’t worry,” you’ll last seconds before you’re back at it. Instead of simply doing that, knowing it won’t help, Jesus said we should focus our hearts and our thoughts and our actions on something else. Focus on his kingdom and his righteousness. Do that first, meaning it must be your highest priority, the main motivation in everything you do.

How do we seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness? What does that mean? God’s kingdom exists wherever God’s rule extends. It exists in heaven right now and into the future, where his reign is unchallenged. It exists anywhere on earth where he is Lord, where the only concern is with what God wills. So God’s kingdom can exist in our lives. When we seek his kingdom we pursue above all else to do his will and be what he wants us to be. Notice he mentioned God’s righteousness. This is actually part of the Sermon on the Mount. A big theme in this sermon is God’s righteousness. Jesus contrasts it with the supposed hypocritical, outer “righteousness” of the religious leaders of his day. True righteousness is genuine goodness right down at the very core of our being. Jesus wants us to concern ourselves with that rather than the things of this world.

Seeking his kingdom and his righteousness is to be the passion that drives and controls every single thing we do. At the beginning of last year it occurred to me that our church was running a bit low on guitar players. I thought there was a possibility that we might in the future need more people to play the guitar. So I decided I should at least attempt to become semi-adequate at playing the instrument. There are a lot of reasons one might try to learn to play an instrument. You could do it to just enjoy music, or maybe to impress someone with your musical prowess, or just to see if you could do it. My main purpose in doing it was, I wanted to seek God’s kingdom. I wanted to do what I could to fill holes in our worship team if necessary. Sure enough, with the pandemic I found myself playing guitar in our garage band live stream. There have been a couple of moments when I began to stress and be frustrated because I’m not better than I am. But that all gets relieved when I seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness. It doesn’t matter if I’m not great. It only matters if I seek to have him be Lord, if I do his will. If he wants me to play the guitar, then I do it the best I can, and that’s all that matters. No stress, anxiety or worry is required.

Anson Hui is 19 years old. At the age of 2 he was diagnosed with Glycogen Storage Disease, which means his body can’t break down or store sugars. So he has had to have many feedings, drinking raw corn starch. At night he is fed through a surgically implanted pump and tube to his stomach. He experienced developmental delays that led to him being a target for bullying at school. He often asked, “Why did God put me here like this?” At the age of 10 it was discovered that he had to have a liver transplant, a risky procedure for a patient with his condition. He has not had an easy time of it. However, it was also discovered at a young age that he has a gift. He said, “While everyone else was busy talking, I listened to all the sounds around me.” His listening helped him develop perfect pitch. He also learned that he could memorize and master complex piano pieces. He has traveled throughout the world performing concerts and has won many prestigious prizes. His medical issues opened up another interest for him. He is now in his third year of medical school at the University of Toronto. He says, “I can’t decide many things God has already planned, but I can…choose to work on my dream…I believe every single life is unique and special. Each has its own mission and purpose.” In a recent interview he said, “My dream is to be a tool of God…so in the end, I can hand in a beautiful report to my Lord in heaven with honor.” He is focusing on God’s kingdom and that has sustained him through some serious difficulty.

**Live in the present**

Finally, notice that Jesus says, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Generally when we stress and worry, it is about something that is in the future. I don’t worry about how we will ever be able to afford to get our kids through college. That’s in the past. It’s a done deal, so no worries there. But things looming in the future is where we stress. The irony is that means that what causes us so much angst is likely something that may never even happen!

I have been blessed by the fact that I haven’t had a lot of problems with my back. My brother has had two back surgeries and his back issues have altered his life to some degree. I’ve have many other friends who have had to deal with back problems. I’ve had minor problems, aches and pains, but nothing major. Until a few weeks ago. My back began giving me some serious grief. This went on for a couple of weeks and I began stressing over it. It wasn’t getting better, and at my age, stuff often doesn’t. Then for a week my back upped the ante significantly. Now I was really starting to stress, envisioning all of the trials I’ve seen others endure. I called the doctor, but couldn’t get an appointment for more than a week. So all that week I was concerned about what this was going to mean. I was moving around like an old man, fearing that was going to be my future. Then at the end of that week in the middle of the day the problem took a quantum leap. I got to a place where I couldn’t move without pain, serious pain. “What is your pain level from 1 to 10?” “It’s 250!” I could find a way I could lie down and stay totally still and the pain was only bad. But if I moved even a little it sent bolts of searing pain into my back that had me gasping for breath. I was thinking Laurie was going to have to call an ambulance to take me to the hospital. I was seriously worried. Fortunately, she had a better idea. She set up a telemedicine consultation. She called our son, Toby. He is really good at what he does as a doctor. Toby asked me a number of questions. Then he instructed Laurie on how to do a couple of tests on me. It only took a few minutes, then he said, “Dad, I know it feels like there’s something badly wrong with your back, but you don’t have a back problem. You have seriously strained a muscle, and while it is transmitting pain to your back, your spine is fine. You just have to treat the muscle problem.” He told us what to do to treat it, and within an hour or two I was already starting to feel better. I tell you that because I stressed over what the future was going to be with my “back problem.” And none of it ever happened. That is what happens with so many of our worries and stresses. They are about what is going to happen in the future, and much of the time the things we are so concerned about never occur.

If we do what Jesus said, just focus on doing today what today needs, we are going to alleviate an awful lot of our stress. In his book, *Freeedom From Tyranny Of The Urgent*, Charles Hummel wrote, “We have only today, this hour within our grasp.” He’s right, so let’s focus on the only day we know we have for sure, and that’s today. A common expression you hear these days, one I use often is, “no worries.” That is a very biblical way to live.