

BIRDS AND FLOWERS JUST DON'T

Matthew 6:25-34

Recently while Laurie and I were snorkeling we saw a manta ray. We spotted him gliding along near the bottom maybe twenty feet below us. This thing was huge. It was the 747 of rays. It was beautiful to watch as he glided through the water, but it was also a little bit disturbing. It was a reminder that I was in his element, not mine. I was in a place where fish belong, not humans, and among those fish are creatures that can do some serious harm to a vulnerable human being. Sharks popped into my mind. What if one showed up? What could I do about it? Not much really. Like I said, the thought was unsettling.

Oddly, though people kind of panic at the thought of sharks for the most part, we don't really need to worry about them. Our chances of being attacked by a shark are miniscule. An average of .92 Americans die annually from shark attacks. That's less than one out of 300 million people. You might think even that number is a little high for comfort, but consider this: 1.1 Americans die every year in trampoline accidents. Or consider the fact that an average of 2.06 Americans die every year from vending machine accidents. How does that happen? I have no idea. Even worse, 5.22 Americans annually die from accidents on riding mowers. I should warn Michael, our son-in-law about that. He flies around in fighter jets but the real danger is the riding mower he owns. But let's get to the big one. Every year in America an average of 26.44 people die by being crushed by furniture. Forget *Jaws*. Cue the ominous music. Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the living room...*Sofa!* We're going to need a bigger moving van. Perhaps we've been worrying about the wrong things. Personally I am keeping a wary eye on our bookshelves. They look a little shifty to me.

What do you worry about? Our son, Toby, is now in medical school. Recently he told us he's surprised that we humans survive because there's so much that can go wrong with us. He says a high percentage of medical students become hypochondriacs. The more we know, the more there is to worry about. Unfortunately worry and anxiety are an all too common downside of life for many of us. If we are going to live joyful lives we absolutely must have some way of dealing with that reality. For help today we will look at some familiar words of Jesus found in Matthew 6:25-34.

JESUS GAVE A SIMPLE COMMAND

The first word in this section of Scripture is "therefore," which tells us Jesus was building on ideas he had just discussed. Context, then, is important. This is part of the most famous sermon ever preached, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. People often talk about living by this sermon, usually those who haven't read it carefully. Often people miss the

fact that the sermon was a direct, frontal attack on ideas about how one can relate to God and what it means to be righteous that were widespread in ancient Israel. These ideas were chiefly promulgated by the Pharisees.

One of the characteristics of that particular group was that while they were scrupulously serious about their religion, they had crafted a system that allowed them to be quite materialistic. Notice that in verses 19-24, Jesus warned against storing up money in this world rather than treasure in heaven and concluded by saying, “No one can serve two masters.” You can’t serve both God and money, which is precisely what the Pharisees tried to do. When Jesus made that same statement in Luke 16:13 he got quite a reaction from the Pharisees. Verse 14 tells us, “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.” They thought that was the dumbest thing they’d ever heard.

The religion of the day said you can serve God while at the same time doing everything in your power to make yourself rich. A parallel today might be the health and wealth gospel of today. If you boil down that message what it tells people to really care about is health and wealth. God becomes a means to that end. In other words, you’re not serving him, he’s serving you. Jesus said you can’t serve God while at the same time making money be the goal of your life.

The “therefore” at the beginning of verse 25 says there is something we need to do to make sure that God is the one we are serving, not the almighty dollar. We need to “not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.” In other words, do not worry about the stuff of this world. Jesus commanded this because worry leads to have something other than God rule our lives. Preoccupation with money or the stuff of this world takes over. So worry is spiritually dangerous. This is a message you see a lot in the Bible. In John 14:1 Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” In John 14:27 he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” In other words, don’t worry. In Philippians 4:6 Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about the little things, but about the big stuff, be very afraid.” Oh, wait, that’s not right. No, he wrote, “Do not be anxious about many things, just stress about a few.” Wait, that’s not right either. He wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything.” Don’t worry about *anything*!

Wait a minute. That can’t be right. I have the spiritual gift of worrying. It’s what I do. If I don’t worry there is no end to the awful things that might happen. Don’t you realize that it is my worrying that keeps all those terrible things from happening? Jesus flatly says, don’t worry, don’t let your heart be troubled, do not be anxious about anything. Don’t worry about what you’re going to eat in the future. Don’t worry about what you will wear. Being the spiritual leader in our home I have tried to put this command to good effect. Laurie stands in front of a closet full of clothes and says, “I don’t know what to

wear tomorrow.” I say, “Don’t worry about it. Jesus says you shouldn’t.” This is where my wife displays her spiritual shortcomings, for she doesn’t respond to my wise instruction well at all. Hey, I’m just sayin’...

Actually in our family if there is someone who worries too much it is not usually going to be Laurie. I am the one who is more prone to worry. I come from a long line of pessimists. Every silver lining has a cloud, you know. But, hey, there’s an awful lot to worry about, isn’t there? It appears our economy is on the cusp of a total meltdown. What if that happens? How will we ever afford to retire? For all of us we face concerns about how to pay for college for the kids, what if we get fired from a job, will our kids ever find godly spouses? I banged my leg on the reef while on vacation and cut it. I was concerned that it might get infected. It did. They gave me antibiotics. After five days the drug wasn’t working. Oh no, I’ve got some drug-resistant flesh-eating bacteria, I’m going to lose my leg at least if it doesn’t end up killing me.

There are so many opportunities to worry. Life presents them almost daily if you’re paying attention. Oh, but see, I don’t worry. I’m just concerned. Could we stop the semantic games? Calling it concern doesn’t change the fact that you’re worrying. Be clear that worry is bad.

God wants what is best for us and worrying is not it. Worry has very negative effects on us. John Milton wrote, “The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.” Our minds, when set loose to worry, can turn life into hell. We all know that’s true. We can turn our lives inside out by worrying and it is not a pleasant place to be at all.

Worry can make us sick. Linda Worley, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Arkansas School of Medicine has done much research on worry. She says that worry leads to increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, and it causes depression, fatigue and memory problems. Other experts say it causes physical changes in the brain, muscle aches, sleep disturbances (well duh), ulcers, diarrhea, colitis and skin problems. Americans spend in excess of \$11 billion annually treating worry.

Worst of all, worry means we are essentially saying to God, “I do not trust you.” As a result we end up doing exactly what Jesus was concerned with in Matthew 6. We become focused on whatever that thing that is causing our worry might be, whether it be money, health, job, or any of the myriad of topics we fret over. That thing rules our lives and we serve it, not God.

Jesus says simply, in a nutshell, “Stop it.” Stop worrying. Oh, all right. I’ll stop right now. Is there something of serious concern to you have you ever tried to just not worry

about? Have you ever had that thing where you are awake in the middle of the night because of this thing that is weighing on your mind and you tell yourself you're just not going to think about it anymore? How does that work for you? I find I still can't go to sleep and within minutes I'm fretting over that thing again.

The Atlantic magazine featured an article last December written by Scott Stossel in which he discussed his lifelong efforts to deal with anxiety. In it he says from an early age he has been “a twitchy bundle of phobias, fears and neuroses.” He describes himself as buffeted by worry. To deal with it he says, “I’ve tried individual psychotherapy (three decades of it), family therapy, group therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, hypnosis, meditation, role playing...self-help workbooks, massage therapy, acupuncture, yoga...and audiotapes I ordered off a late night TV infomercial. And medication. Lots of medication. Thorazine, Imipramine, Desipramine, Chlorpheniramine, Nardil, BuSpar, Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Wellbutrin, Effexor, Celexa, Lexapro, Cymbalta, Luvox, Trazodone, Levoxyl, Inderal, Tranxene, Serax, Centrax, St. John’s Wort, Zolpidem, Valium, Librium, Ativan, Xanax, Klonopin. Also alcohol. Here’s what has worked: nothing.” So how are we supposed to not worry?

JESUS TOLD US HOW TO DO IT

Believe In God’s Providence

What do we mean by providence? The late J. Vernon McGee said, “Providence means that the hand of God is in the glove of human events...Providence is the unseen rudder on the ship of state. God is the pilot at the wheel during the night watch.”

I like those pictures. We see the glove, but we don’t see the hand in the glove that commands where that glove should go, but the hand is there. We see the ship turning, but we don’t see the rudder that causes it to do so. There are people around us who, not seeing the rudder, will insist that it does not exist. I don’t know how they think the ship turns, but who can believe in a rudder when you don’t see it? Obviously you get the point. Imagine a baseball glove. Have you ever seen a glove out there on a baseball diamond fielding ground balls all by itself? It certainly would have a hard time making the throw over to first base. The glove is moved by the hand to accomplish the task for which it has been created. So it is with this world. God is the hand that moves the glove. We can’t see God, but when the ship turns we know the rudder is there. We can’t see where the ship of this world is going, but we can trust the pilot who is at the wheel.

Theologian A. A. Hodge wrote in his *Outlines Of Theology* (p. 262) that God “continually controls and directs the actions of all his creatures...so that while he never violates the law of their several natures, he yet infallibly causes all actions and events...to

occur according to the eternal and immutable plan embraced in his decree.” In other words, we can trust God’s work in this world. He is at work in everything that is happening, bringing his good purpose to pass.

As a part of that we can trust that while God may not give us all that we think we want, he will give us what we need. Philippians 4:19 says, “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Notice what the standard is. “According to his glorious riches.” How rich do you suppose God is? He’s way better off than our government. He doesn’t have to borrow from anybody. God has everything you and I need, in abundance.

Psalms 34:9-10 says, “Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.” Out in the wilderness if someone’s going to go hungry, it’s not going to be the lions. They’re at the top of the food chain. They’ll just pounce on some lesser animal and feast away. The Psalmist says even those guys, the real sharks in the economy, the big whales that have all the cash, may find themselves to their shock going hungry. But if we seek the Lord we will lack no good thing. That’s an astounding promise.

Jesus gives us illustrations. People worry about having enough money so they can have food to eat and clothes to wear. That right there tells you that we are really spoiled. We don’t typically fret over having food and clothes. We take that as a given and we worry about lots of other stuff. But let’s let food and clothes stand in for our worries. Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”

Laurie and I bought a 20 pound bag of bird seed at the grocery store. The goal was to bring birds to the feeder in our back yard so I could do some research. We have a family of mourning doves that frequent our feeder along with sparrows, finches, an occasional oriole, some towhees, hummingbirds and others. In anticipation of this sermon I interviewed many of them. What I found out was appalling. Not one of them has a job. In fact none of them even went to college. They don’t have any ambition at all. You know that early bird gets the worm thing? They aren’t impressed. They show up pretty much whenever they feel like it and often that’s in the middle of the afternoon. Can you believe this: they have no plan for retirement! There’s not a 401K or an IRA among them and they claim they’ve never heard of Social Security. When I talked about what they thought people would think of them they just looked at me with blank stares.

I have been impressed with the flowers around our house. We have impatiens, roses, carnations, azaleas, bougainvillea, and a number of others. I really like how they dress so I tried to interview them about that. My conversation with them was equally

unproductive. They don't seem to worry about what they're going to look like at all. God takes care of the flowers and the birds. So the question is, do you think he cares more about them than he does you? Here's a hint: the Son of God did not die on a cross for flowers and birds.

On September 1 this year Laurie and I got on an airplane. At 7:10 in the morning the aircraft pulled away from the gate, taxied to the runway, then launched off into the wild blue yonder, heading southwest. We were bound for Kahului, Maui, 2540 miles away. All went just fine for a while. I was seated on the aisle so couldn't see much out the windows. But a couple of hours into the flight I got up to go to the restroom. That's when the trouble started. On my way I looked out the windows on both sides of the aircraft. No matter where I looked I could see nothing but water. There was no land and so no landmarks. It was broad daylight so there were no stars to navigate by. I began to worry. Have you ever seen a map or a globe? Have you seen the size of the Pacific Ocean? Have you seen how small Maui looks in the middle of that ocean? It's a tiny dot out in the middle of nothing but trackless, featureless water! I came back to my seat now working myself into a frenzy. I said to Laurie, "There is nothing out there but water. There's no way the pilot knows where we are. If he's even two degrees off course we will miss the island by 100 miles and never know it. What are the chances he's going to actually find that tiny dot in the middle of all that water? Flying from Maui back to San Diego is no problem. Head northeast and eventually you'll hit the mainland. You can't miss it. But that tiny island out in the middle of the ocean? We're doomed. We're going to have to use the life preservers they told us about when we go down in the ocean." I began looking at the emergency card in that pouch in front of me, reviewing the use of the life preserver and the locations of the life rafts. She, of course, looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

Okay, that didn't really happen. We got on the plane, sat in our seats, did a crossword puzzle, watched some shows on our tablet computer, read a little, and relaxed. We did not worry for a moment about the pilot finding his way to that island. We were totally confident that though we couldn't see where we were going and though we had no way of navigating there, he had all the resources necessary to get us right where we were headed. We knew he had a GPS navigation system that could pinpoint that plane to within a few feet and guide it to a landing with unerring accuracy. Sure enough we landed right on the runway a few minutes ahead of schedule.

The key for us being able to not worry is to have as much faith in God's piloting of our lives as we did in the pilot of that aircraft. If I worried about that plane getting to the right place, would it have helped us get there? No, my worrying would accomplish nothing except to make me and everyone around me miserable. Jesus asked the pertinent question in verse 27. "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" The answer to that is none of us. Just like my worrying would not help the plane get to the airport safely,

so our worrying won't help anything in this world. Let the pilot fly the plane and let God steer the world and your life. God guarantees you will lack no good thing.

Proverbs 3:6 says of the Lord, "In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight." He will put you on the road straight to where you need to go. Proverbs 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course but the Lord determines his steps." So Psalm 34:5 says of the Lord, "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame." Trust that the Lord can direct your steps.

Pursue the Kingdom

Again just telling us not to do something isn't all that helpful. We need to replace worry with something else. Jesus gives it to us in verse 33. The world is utterly obsessed with money, success, clothes, approval, acceptance, power. In verse 32 Jesus said the Father knows what you need. It is not a surprise to him that you need to eat and you need a place to live and clothes to wear. God does not wake up in the morning and say, "Wait, you need something to eat? My bad, I had no idea." The point is he's going to take care of that.

So what are we supposed to do? We don't have to go crazy chasing after all the stuff of the world. Instead we "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." Jesus promised as we do that all these things, all the things we need, will be provided for us. What does it mean to seek God's kingdom? Are we supposed to go looking for it? *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says that the term as used here referred to the philosophical quest of one's life. Thus, make the kingdom your quest.

A kingdom is that place where a king rules. As far as the king rules, that is his kingdom. Laurie and Toby once visited the island kingdom of Tonga. On that island the king's will is done. But San Diego is not his kingdom. He has no authority, no power here. So wherever God reigns, that is his kingdom. Wherever God's will is the deciding factor in what is done, that is his kingdom. Heaven right now is the kingdom of God because he rules totally there. Here on earth God is letting people, at least for a time, live without regard to his rule, thus outside his kingdom. On earth where God rules, that is his kingdom. So his kingdom exists in our hearts and our lives to the extent that we let him rule.

In his commentary on Matthew Mike Wilkins wrote (p. 299) that it means to "make the kingdom of heaven the center of... continual daily priorities." To seek first God's kingdom is to seek to have God rule in our own lives. It is to expand his reign over everything in our thoughts, desires, words and actions. To seek his kingdom is to do everything we can to bring about his rule not only in our lives but in the lives of others.

There is an important point here. Worry is really about where your heart is. We worry about that which matters to us. Laurie and I were out for a walk when we encountered one of our neighbors. This guy informed us that he is going to run for the board of directors for our neighborhood home owners association. He explained that he is actually going to campaign to get on the board because he is ardently convinced of the need for regime change. He explained why the current regime is in such need of removal. Actually he didn't have to convince me. I've been peeved by some of the actions of the board members. But then I've been peeved for more than 20 years. So I hope he wins. I'll vote for him. But do you know how much sleep I have lost or will lose over that upcoming election? That would be absolute zero. I will not spend one minute worrying about the outcome of that election because it doesn't matter to me. We only worry about the things that matter to us.

What this suggests is that the key to resolving worry is to change what's important to you. When the kingdom of God is what matters above all else, then I am not going to be worried about money, nor am I going to grow anxious over whether someone respects me or treats me as I think I deserve to be treated. What I care about is God's kingdom and so how they treat me is insignificant. This has both large and small implications for us. It means that what we make the focus of our lives is extending God's rule over our relationships, our sexuality, our jobs, our houses, our conversations, our thoughts, our money, everything in our lives. It means what we are all about is letting God rule it all and seeing his kingdom grow.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5 Paul said, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." When we make our thoughts obedient to Christ we are expanding his kingdom.

One evening while we were on vacation Laurie and I were shopping. I had told her I wanted to get her some jewelry for our anniversary while we were on our trip. We looked in a number of jewelry stores and totally struck out. We didn't like much of what we saw, and what we did like caused some severe sticker shock. We really didn't want to trade our house for a necklace. We had almost given up, but Laurie decided she wanted to look in a little boutique we had passed a number of times but regarded as likely unhelpful. It turned out the shop was owned by a young 30 something woman who was quite pregnant. This woman was very energetic and absurdly gregarious. As soon as we walked into the shop she instantly took to Laurie. Laurie bought a necklace she really liked, and the woman said, "You have to come back so I can show you some other things." Two days later we went back, and as soon as Laurie stepped into the store you would have thought it was a reunion of lifelong friends. The woman excused herself from her other customers came over and hugged Laurie enthusiastically and seemed ridiculously happy to see her.

Later after we left the store Laurie said, “When we get home I want to buy a gift for her baby and send it to her.” I asked why, and she said, “I want to just express love to her, and who knows, maybe God will use that to open a door so that she can find out about Jesus.” What was on her heart was expanding the kingdom of God.

What do we do when our spouse lets us down? We don’t deny the disappointment and hurt, but we seek to expand the rule of God in our lives. That means that we say what matters is that I would respond to my spouse with grace, patience, kindness and love. What do I do when I am unfairly fired from my job and seriously stress about how I am going to support my family? I remind myself that what I care about is expanding the rule of God in my life. I trust that God will bring some good out of this, will provide what we need, and I seek to do his will, which is to glorify him by trusting him and praising him.

Live in the Present

Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own. This is an often quoted command full of great wisdom. What we often miss is Jesus’ humor peeking through here. That last statement was intended to bring a little smile to our faces. Jesus is saying, “What, today isn’t hard enough? You don’t have enough going wrong today so you think you have to create something that might go wrong tomorrow to worry about? You need to borrow trouble from tomorrow?” Isn’t that true? Don’t you find that your day typically has all the hurdles to get over that you need to keep your attention? Why don’t you focus on that?

Would it make sense for a baseball player to be at bat facing a pitcher who is throwing 94 mile per hour fastballs to be thinking, “Wow, next week that guy who throws 97 miles per hour is going to pitch against us. I hope I can catch up to his fastball. And how am I going to deal with it if that guy throws me a changeup?” If he’s doing that I assure you he’s going to strike out. He needs to pay attention to where he is and what he’s doing. Thinking about that at bat that’s a week away will not help him then and it distracts him from what he must do right now. So live in the moment.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert wrote in his best-selling book, *Stumbling On Happiness*, “the human being is the only animal that *thinks about the future*... Human beings think about the future in a way that no other animal can, does, or ever has.” He goes on to say that the average adult spends 12% of his day thinking about the future. This has some obvious advantages. It allows us to plan and to prepare. But it also opens up the possibility of being paralyzed by what might happen in the future, because we can imagine all kinds of things.

However, our worrying about the future fails to take into account two things. First, worrying about it does not change anything. It is always good to prepare for the future to

whatever extent possible, but that can be taken to an extreme. So we should prepare as we can to whatever extent is reasonable, then we need to trust and relax. The second problem about worrying is that a large portion of the time what we worry about never happens.

Before we went on vacation we set up a really great deal for a rental car. I was surprised and very happy we could get such a low price for a car rental. When we arrived at our destination we found the shuttle bus that would take us to the agency that was going to rent us the car at such a good price. All of the rental agencies there are located right next to the airport, a two minute shuttle ride from the terminal. However, our shuttle drove right by all those agencies. It wound its way through some back streets into a sketchy part of town. I had no idea where we were going and began to get concerned about why we had gotten such a good deal. We arrived at the agency and it was a kind of run down looking facility in a run down looking area. We went into the building and found a line of people waiting to rent cars and only one employee working. We had a long wait before we finally got our car. During that time I grew concerned about what would happen when we had to return the car at the end of our vacation. First just finding the facility when we came back would be no mean feat. Then it appeared given the lack of service that it would take a long time to turn the car in and even longer to get a shuttle ride back to the airport. I began thinking about whether we might have to call a cab if the shuttle was taking too long because I didn't want to miss our flight home. Our whole time there that little concern about that rental car agency was in the back of my mind. It wasn't ever present and didn't ruin our vacation, but every now and then it popped up. So I made sure on our last day we headed there with lots of time to spare. Emphasis on lots. To my surprise they checked us in quickly, got us on a shuttle bus and returned us to the airport in short order. We ended up spending hours at the airport because we were so early.

So often the things we worry about never happen. Why worry about tomorrow? The things in the future we stress over may never even happen. Abraham Maslow, the psychologist famous for his hierarchy of human needs, said, "The ability to be in the present moment is a major component of mental wellness." Francois Fenelon wrote, "Above all, live in the present moment and God will give you all the grace you need." Let's trust in our God's goodness and providence, live for his kingdom, and live in the present.