52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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Because spiritual growth matters
32. Seeking God

I. Worry

Have you noticed that we can worry about anything and everything? Our creativity as human beings is seen in all the ways in which we can find to worry about something. We can worry about paying off the new building even though it’s not built. We can worry about getting married even when we haven’t learned how to date yet. We can worry about making ends meet, even when there’s money in the bank, we can still worry about it. It seems that there’s nothing that we can’t worry about. And I suspect that one of the reasons we’re so creative in our worrying is that we like it. I suspect we like it because worry can carry the illusion that it actually accomplishes something, which of course it doesn’t. Or more dangerously, worry carries the illusion that we’re in control. And we like to worry.

The Sermon on the Mount is counter-cultural in what it teaches about worry. The Sermon on the Mount is counter-cultural in the extreme when it comes to its teaching about worry. In a nutshell let me summarize what the Sermon says about worry. The kind of person who recognizes his spiritual poverty and trusts in God’s righteousness is the kind of person who will replace worry with faith as he seeks hard after God. In a nutshell, that’s what the Sermon on the Mount is teaching about worry. Now let me unpack it.

II. Disciples Have Given Their “Unwavering Loyalty”

Jesus has been discussing for several paragraphs the fact that disciples trust him and not mammon, not material wealth. He’s been talking about how disciples have given their unwavering loyalty to him as their King. And as that as the backdrop, we’ll start in Matthew 6:25.

A. Logic: (implied) God has already given us life/body

He’s saying because we have trusted in God and not in ourselves, therefore, that trust shows itself in a refusal to worry about the everyday necessities of life. Please watch the logic carefully because some of it is implied. The implied part is that God has already given us life. God has already given us our bodies. And certainly he will sustain the life that he has created with food, with eat and drink. And certainly he will sustain the body he has created with clothing. He is not only Creator, but he is Sustainer, and therefore you and I have no worries.

B. Two Illustrations From Nature

To drive the point home then, Jesus draws out two illustrations from nature. The first is in verse 26 when He talks about God feeding the birds: “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 of course the answer is “yes.” Then he adds parenthetically verse 27, “And which of you be being anxious can add a single
hour to his span of life?” Why would you want to worry? It doesn’t do any good except perhaps to get you that ulcer you’ve always wanted.

And the second illustration is God’s clothing the flowers, starting in verse 28, “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?” If God cares for His creation, He will also care for you and me. In fact, He will care more for you and me because we are of greater worth. John Stott quotes Martin Luther. Luther writes, “You see, Jesus is making the birds our school masters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the gospel, a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men.”

Both of these illustrations, God feeding the birds and God clothing the wildflowers, are based on one fundamental truth and if we do not fully accept that fundamental truth then the flow of the passage breaks down and makes very little sense. The fundamental truth of this passage is that God does, in fact, feed the birds. And that God, in fact, does clothe the flowers. That’s the underlying truth of this passage. What do you see when you see a robin tugging at a worm, or the wildflowers on the side of Mount Rainier? What do you see when you see pictures of distant galaxies or the infinite variety of all creation? What do you see? Do you see impersonal forces of nature and evolution just kind of doing what nature and evolution does? Or do you see the Creator and the Sustainer of all life?

C. Seeing God in Creation

As we look at Creation we must learn to see God. When we look at Creation we must learn to see that the Creator is also the Sustainer and is busy at work. And sometimes when we look we see God working in supernatural ways, don’t we? We see God giving life to a newborn baby that should have died. We see God stretching out his hand and stopping the truck that’s sliding into your car. Sometimes when we look at creation, we do see God working in these, what we call supernatural, what perhaps could better be called unusual or extraordinary ways. But as we look at creation we must also learn to see God working through the “laws of nature.” The laws that God established and the laws that God still superintends. What we call the laws of nature (and don’t let your high school science teacher tell you differently) the laws of nature are still supernatural. Gravity does not work because mass attracts. Gravity works because God says mass should attract. It is God; it is not “Mother Nature” who oversees the cycle of life that produces worms for the robin and photosynthesis for the plants. It is God at work creating and sustaining his creation. We must learn to see God at work supernaturally in both the mundane and the unusual, the ordinary and the extraordinary, all of which, are supernatural because God feeds the birds, Jesus says. And God clothes the flowers, Jesus says.

And it is only when we see that God does, in fact, feed the birds and clothes the flowers, that we will then be able to see that God also feeds me and God clothes you. And sometime his sustaining work will be through ordinary means of which there is no such thing. Sometimes he will care for us by giving us a certain genetic structure, a certain kind of intelligence, a certain set of experiences in life that enable us to function as an individual. He gives us our education and he gives us our job. And with these ordinary, which are supernatural to the eyes of faith, with these ordinary means we are called to
work, right? We are called to work as diligently as the birds work. In fact, Paul tells the Thessalonian church in 2 Thessalonians 5:8, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” This is not an excuse to be lazy.
But sometimes he provides for us through ordinary means and we are to take advantage of those in a good sense and work on them; and yet at other times he will take care of us through extraordinary, unusual, wonderful surprises.
I remember a friend of mine in graduate school. His name is Gene and someday I’d like a short story about Gene and the Giant Turnip. He had no money. His folks weren’t believers, I believe. They were not in favor of him getting his schooling. He was going home one day and he found a giant turnip by the side of the road. He ate it for three days. At the end of three days a gift came from his home church, out of the blue, with enough money to get him through the next month. And we can take those kinds of stories and multiply them by the thousands and by the millions as God takes care of his creation, as God sustains his creation, through not only usual but unusual ways.
The meaning of this passage is that our Heavenly Father created us and he has committed to provide for us and therefore, we must not worry.

III. Repeats Theme (v 31) – Two reasons (v 32)
Jesus then repeats his theme in verse 31, “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” And then he continues with two more reasons why.

A. “For the Gentiles seek after all these things”
The first is, “For the Gentiles, [the non-disciples of Jesus Christ]. For the Gentiles seek after all these things.” You know those that do not know God, those that do not know him through Jesus Christ, are justifiably preoccupied with survival, because God has made no promise, no commitment to them, no commitment for food and no commitment for clothing. He will send the rain on the just and the unjust, but he has no commitment like this to them. And they are justifiably preoccupied and thinking that there’s nothing more to life than food and clothing. But when you and I worry about food, when you and I worry about clothing, we look and we sound just like them. And that can’t be, because we are countercultural. That’s the Sermon on the Mount, right? We are supposed to be different. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We are set apart. We are in the world but not of the world. We cannot afford to look like the world. The minute we start looking and sounding and smelling like the world, then we no longer are salt and light; and we no longer can perform our function in this world. We can’t afford to look like the Gentiles look.

B. “Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all”
But then there’s a second reason, he says, “Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all,” and as he has been arguing, our heavenly Father has committed to providing them all. To worry is to call into question the love and the promise and the provision of God. To worry is to call into question the love and the promise and the provision of God. Or to say it another way, to worry is practical atheism and an affront to God. This is why in verse 30 Jesus says, “Oh, you of little faith.” This is one reason I have my astronomy picture of day site that I love to go to. That as I look at pictures of God’s galaxies and stars in this universe, I am reminded of the very God that created and
sustains nebulae that I will never see, is in fact, the God who created me, and, in fact, the God that sustains me. Who has committed himself to me and I cannot act like an atheist. I cannot act, I must not act like I don’t believe the God of the universe and worry.

C. Good and Bad Anxiousness
Now there is an anxiousness that is good, is there not? We have other words for it. We call it concern or something. And we certainly have concerns that are valid. We have a concern that calls us to work hard every day as unto the Lord and not be lazy. We have concerns for our own sin and for the needs of others. There are concerns that are valid, that are scriptural, and that are supposed to be part of our life. We are not supposed to go through life with our eyes shut just grinning all the time. That’s not the Biblical picture of life.

But there is an anxiousness that comes from lack of faith. There is an anxiousness that comes when you and I are convinced that the God who gave us life will not sustain that life. It’s a lack of faith that dethrones God. And I crawl back up on the throne of my life and I try to take charge and one of the characteristics of my kingdom is that I like to worry. When you and I live this kind of self-centered, faithless, anxious life then we have become narcissistic atheists.

D. “Do Not” Replaced by “Do”
But fortunately, the negative, “do not”, that runs through this passage of this point is replaced with a positive, “do,” in verse 33, “But [in contrast to a life of worrying and a life of little faith] But, seek first above all things the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all of these things will be added to you.” Please remember the context of verse 33. You and I recognize our spiritual impoverishment. We are poor in spirit. We understand that we have nothing in and of ourselves to deal with our sin that we can offer to God and earn our salvation or even earn his favor. We are spiritually impoverished, to the point that we mourn over our sin and the sin of this world. And because there is nothing that will fill us in ourselves naturally, we hunger and we thirst for God’s righteousness. We pray, “May your kingdom come, may your will be done.” We are people who have chosen to trust God, rather than to trust ourselves; and therefore, rather than worrying about the necessities of life, things that God has committed himself to care for, rather than worry, we fill ourselves up by seeking God’s kingdom.

But it is first and foremost in our hearts and our minds and in our tongue and in our actions, we seek his rule, his dominion in my life. We seek it among ourselves as brothers and sisters in the church. We seek God’s rule and reign in the Shiloh Hills neighborhood and to the very ends of the earth. We seek first, above all other things, filling ourselves up with God and making much of him. And we seek for his righteousness. We seek that God’s righteous standards be established and followed. That he be seen to be holy and that it’s his righteousness that people see in my life. That it’s his righteousness that we see in one another’s lives. And ultimately someday it’s his righteousness that we see in every corner of the earth. That when he comes back again that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. How much better to do that, then worry?

What is our Essence Statement as a church? Where do you think it came from? We are people pursuing God in spirit and truth. It comes right out of Matthew 6:33. We are
people who pursue God, who seek his kingdom, his reign, his rule, and his righteousness above all else. We fill ourselves with the love and a trust and a pursuit of God because he has enabled us to do that; a God who has given us life and has promised to sustain that life as he sees fit. And that is the kind of life in which there is no room for faithless worry, is there?

And the promise that as we seek him, as we fill ourselves with God, as we make much of him and his righteousness, then all of these things will simply be added to us. As we seek, he gives us our needs, not our greed, but he gives us our needs. Sometimes through that which appears to be mundane and yet is wonderful beyond description and yet sometimes he gives through unexpected. But he will give all things we need for life and for body. That is the promise of the God who creates all and sustains all. Do you believe this? Do you believe this? Sometimes when I look at my life, and I like to worry, I have to wonder if I really believe this. My mom’s mom always had a saying, I think I shared it with you earlier, that if we worry about something long enough it always works out. You should always say it with a smile though. I wonder as I look at my life and how I spend my time, whether I really believe that God will provide for my needs.

But I also found myself asking the question, do I really believe this, because I find myself wondering, “Don’t saints die from starvation?” “Don’t saints die from exposure?” If you know church history, the answer is “absolutely.” It’s a difficult question. And I’m not sure that I’ve got an answer that I’m fully comfortable with. But I do know that part of the answer lies in verse 25 because the implication of verse 25 is that life is more than food. And that we do have everything we need for true life. And that life is more than clothing. And we have been clothed with his righteousness. That’s certainly got to be part of the answer.

But I think another part of the answer is that there is enough food, and there is enough clothing for the saints in this world. The problem is not God’s provision, it’s the distribution. Now those who have it won’t share with those who don’t. Perhaps the problem of this passage is more our lack of missions then lack of God’s provision. Something to think about.

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. I don’t know about you but that should be freeing. You should feel that this is an issue you deal with. You should feel like layers of an onion, the pieces just falling off your back. You’re still called to work hard, you don’t work hard you’re not supposed to eat, it’s your problem in a sense, Paul says to the Thessalonians. But we can let that go. And the fact that we have trusted God; we can allow him to do his work in sustaining his creation.

Let’s not be practicing atheists. Let’s not do that. Let’s not act like there is no God or that he doesn’t care; or he isn’t powerful enough to sustain His creation. Let’s not act like that.

But rather let’s be joyful about asserting our own impoverishment and God’s riches. Let’s free ourselves from the illusions that come with worry, illusions of control, illusions that it does something. Let’s learn to see God at work everywhere, in every way. Let’s let the birds and the wildflowers become our teachers and let’s replace worry with trust in God’s provision and care.

Now this doesn’t happen overnight. It’s a process, isn’t it? It’s a process that begins with a correct understanding of myself, that I am impoverished, that I am called to mourn over my impoverishment. And that as you and I hunger and thirst, then we will fill our hearts and we will fill our minds with Jesus and we will find that he does satisfy our
hunger. He does refresh our thirst and he does clothe our bodies. And with that we will be content.