

Overcoming Anxiety (Matt 6.25-34)

I. PURSUING OBEDIENCE WITHOUT FEAR

- A. Jesus closes the section on the means of grace we are to *actively pursue* by addressing how the necessity of pursuing obedience to him with a heart liberated from fear and anxiety.
- B. Pursuing obedience to Jesus' commandments outlined in the Sermon on the Mount brings disciples face to face with a logical and pervasive question: "If I pursue wholehearted obedience to God in all these ways (i.e., resisting the temptations, pursuing the means of grace, and seeking to walk in the values of his kingdom), will he provide and care for me?"
- C. The primary thrust of this section is Jesus' command to not be anxious. This word occurs *six times* in these verses (Matt 6.25, 27, 28, 31, 34).
- D. In the immediate context, Jesus is teaching his disciples that they need not be anxious about money as they seek to orient their lives around him as their true and sole master.
- E. The result of pursuing the values and lifestyle of God's kingdom brings us to the place where we wonder if we will be provided for. If we truly lay down our rights, if we truly give, if we truly put ourselves in a place of voluntary weakness, if we truly store up treasures in heaven and not on earth, if we truly pursue have a singular eye toward the things of God, and if we truly serve God and not money — our hearts are tempted to be caught up with anxious worry about whether God will come through on his word or not.
- F. Jesus understands that anxiety (worry, fear) hinders us from walking in the fullness of life in him and the experience of his kingdom. Anxiety is a detriment to our growth in the values of the kingdom — and, we see from this passage, that it is *evidence* of a divided heart.

II. UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

- A. To rightly understand the nature of Jesus' exhortation and invitation in this section, we must seek to understand what it means to be "anxious".
- B. It is essential for us to know that Jesus is in no way promising his disciples that they will never experience hardship or trouble in this world, as if to believe that if we simply trusted in him enough our lives would never experience disappointment, tension, trouble, or sorrow.
- C. Rather, Jesus is instructing his disciples *how* to live in this world. Although they will experience times of hardship and trouble (cf. Matt 5.11-12; John 16.33) they can walk through their lives with a trust in him.
- D. To walk with an anxious heart is to possess unrenewed and fleshly narratives that *see* the world (and our circumstances) in a particular way. This leads to our hearts being fretful about things on the horizon of our lives that we have no control over.
- E. Jesus is also not here saying that we should never think about or plan for the future in any way. Biblical wisdom outlines many specific ways in which we are to plan with wisdom for our futures. However, Jesus is highlighting the propensity in each of us to be driven by fearful, toilsome, and fretful worry about the future.
- F. This, Jesus declares, is rooted in a spirit of unbelief. Anxiety in this section is an outworking of a divided heart, one that is not singularly (wholly, completely) focused on the kingdom of heaven and the values of Jesus.
- G. Elsewhere in the Scripture, we are invited to pursue a posture of humble and grateful trust in the Lord as the cure for this type of anxiety.

⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4.6-7)

H. Jesus uses this same word (*merimnaō*) when speaking of Martha's divided disposition in serving. In this story, the problem was not that Martha was serving, but that she was divided and distracted by many things when there was *one thing* needed (to sit at Jesus' feet).

³⁸But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴²but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10.38-42)

I. We see from these other passages that to be anxious, fretful, and worrisome is a indicator of places where we are divided, distracted, and not of "singular eye" in our lives. We cannot store up treasure in two places; we cannot have our eye filled with light and darkness; and we cannot serve God and money.

J. We must understand that anxiety and worrisome toil is counter to a steadfast heart set on faith-filled obedience to Jesus' ways.

III. JESUS' REMEDY TO ANXIETY

A. In this section Jesus outlines five reasons to not be given over to anxiety and fretful mindsets in our lives. These five realities are to shape the way we *see* the world in order that our experience (our *feelings*) in the world would be transformed.

B. Many believers struggle with darkened and toilsome emotions and are unaware of how these are shaped by what we actually believe. Jesus invites us to believe certain realities in order to see change (over time) in our inner disposition toward the world.

C. **Reason #1:** Our lives are more than just our physical needs. The first truth that we are to hold on to is that there are *greater needs* in our lives than merely the fulfillment of our physical needs. Jesus is quick to tell his hearers that life is about more than food and the body is about more than clothing. In other words, he is attempting to show them that there are also spiritual needs that they need to be concerned with that have eternal and lasting value.

²⁵Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matt 6.25)

1. Jesus is not teaching that physical realities do not matter, but that they are not the *only things* that matter — or even the *ultimate things* that matter.
2. We may experience physical hardship and suffering and have an alive heart. Likewise, we can experience abundance in our physical needs and have a dead soul. Jesus invites us to *rightly order* the scale of our needs in light of eternity.

²⁸And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt 10.28)

²⁶What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? (Matt 16.26)

D. **Reason #2:** We are more valuable to God than the rest of creation. Jesus uses a "lesser to the greater" argument to establish us in the truth of his sovereign care over us.

²⁶Look 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? ...²⁸Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (Matt 6.26, 28)

1. Jesus here invites his disciples to **look at** the birds of the air and **consider** the flowers of the field. In doing so he is inviting us to **see** things differently in accordance with his perspective.
2. It is important to see that Jesus is *not* saying here to be lazy. The birds of the air still leave their nests to search for (or hunt for) food. Rather, Jesus is saying that even though they work diligently, it is ultimately God who provides for them through the means that he has created for them to be fed. Ultimately, Jesus is highlighting that the birds of the air do not have anxiety as they go about what is in front of them. Likewise, we should not have anxiety about provision because we are of greater value than the birds of the air.
3. Jesus also invites his disciples to consider the lilies of the field. The uncultivated wildflowers are stunningly beautiful without any intention or toil, yet they are clothed in glorious splendor even though they are short lived. The principle we are to believe here is that God is able to provide the basic needs of his children as we pursue obedience to him with the whole of our lives.

E. **Reason #3:** We cannot add anything to our lives through anxiety and worry. Jesus wants to remind us that a fretful disposition of fear toward tomorrow has no power to ultimately change anything.

²⁷And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his lifespan? (Matt 6.27)

1. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus declares that adding an hour to our life is a "small thing" that cannot be accomplished by worry.

²⁵And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁶If you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? (Luke 12.25-26)

2. Prolonged, sustained worry is more likely to have adverse effects on our lives than to add to our lives.

F. **Reason #4:** Your Father already knows what you need.

³²your heavenly Father knows that you need them all (Matt 6.32)

1. Jesus declares that our hope and our confidence ought to be in the fact that our Father *already knows* all that we need (cf. Matt 6.8).
2. We must remember two things when understanding this promise. First, God understands that our true *needs* are broader than just our physical needs. Second, we must remember that at times God's understanding of our need and our perception of our need will be different.
3. To understand that God already knows our needs and provides them (even in his mysterious sovereignty) helps us to cultivate and grow in a spirit of contented gratitude.

¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4.11-13)

G. **Reason #5:** Tomorrow has enough troubles of its own. Said differently, Jesus wants us to believe that there is sufficient grace for *today's* needs.

³⁴Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Matt 6.34)

1. Jesus taught us to pray for enough provision for *each day*.
2. Jesus understands that we cannot see what tomorrow brings, and therefore to spend time with a heart that is divided in anxiety and toil is futile.

IV. SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM

- A. In addition to the five truths we are to believe and orient our lives around differently, Jesus invites us to *pursue* something in order to see sustained victory over anxiety and a spirit of fear.
- B. Jesus exhorts his disciples to *seek first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness. To seek first God's kingdom and righteousness is *logical* in its call not *chronological*. In other words, Jesus is talking about being "singular" or "wholehearted" in our commitment to his ways.
- ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt 6.33)
- C. In summary form, this exhortation serves as a reiteration of all that Jesus has instructed us to this point. To seek first his kingdom is to set our hearts to pursue the things that are valuable to him and to order our lives in accordance with his ways.
- D. ***The Kingdom of God***: This speaks of the specific place where God's rule and reign, his dominion, and his kingship are experienced. We are to submit the whole of our lives to his Lordship in wholehearted allegiance (our time, resources, money, relationships, vocation, future, destiny, ambitions, etc.).
- E. ***His Righteousness***: In this context, the righteousness that Jesus is speaking of is the "greater righteousness" being offered in him and in his teachings (Matt 5.20). To seek first his righteousness is to intentionally and consistently orient our lives around his teachings by faith and in partnership with his grace given us.
1. We do this by seeking to ***cultivate*** and ***embody*** the markers of his kingdom outlined in the beatitudes. These are the values of his kingdom and we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness by regularly ordering our lives to see these as good, beautiful, and the only way to true/lasting fulfillment.
 2. We do this by seeking to ***actively resist*** the temptations that Jesus outlined in Matthew 5 (anger, lust, divorce, false oaths, retaliation, and withholding love). These sins choke out the life of God's kingdom and righteousness in us. We actively resist them by ***repenting*** of them, ***rejoicing*** in the mercy and freedom given to us in Christ Jesus, and ***waging war*** on them by operating in the opposite spirit.
 3. We do this by seeking to ***actively pursue*** the means of grace that are outlined in the first part of Matthew 6 (serving, almsgiving, prayer, fasting, forgiveness, and single-hearted pursuit). Pursuing these graces orients us more regularly to receive God's grace by the power of the Spirit by putting us more and more into a posture of ***voluntary weakness***. Through these pursuits we declare that we cannot accomplish God's life and purposes in our own strength and need him to come and move in our hearts.
- F. Jesus calls us to singularly order our lives around submission to him. He is to be our Lord and our Master. Our treasure is to be in heaven and not on earth. In this context, anxiety is then not a "natural" part of life, but a warning sign of a divided allegiance. We are to repent of anxiety and submit ourselves again to Christ and his kingdom.
- G. Jesus promises that for those who seek first his kingdom and righteousness, that ***all these things*** will be added. In a context that has spoken extensively of rewards given by the Father who sees all things done in secret, we must be confident that to orient our lives around the ways of Jesus by faith will ultimately result in experiencing true and lasting life.
- H. The addition of all these things to those who seek first the kingdom will be experienced in various ways throughout our lives. They will be experienced ***internally*** (greater grace, fruits of the spirit, etc.) and at times ***externally*** (provision, protection, etc.). However, the truth of the Scripture is that we will ultimately experience the addition of all these things ***eternally*** in the age to come.

²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it... ²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come... and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. (Matt 16.25, 27)