

Best Practices for Followers of Jesus: Handling Worry
From the Series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"
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Introduction

From time to time, I like to share interesting headlines from the news. Here are a few:

"Texas woman faced felony charge for not returning VHS tape over 2 decades ago"

"A Texas woman recently learned she was charged with a felony after not returning a VHS tape for over 20 years... Caron McBride, a former Oklahoma resident, faced a felony embezzlement charge for not returning 'Sabrina the Teenage Witch' to a movie rental store in Norman in 1999." (CBS News 4/26/2021)

This one is painful:

"Michigan woman glues eye shut after mistaking nail glue for eye drops"

"A Michigan woman nearly lost her vision last week after she mistook a bottle of nail glue for eye drops, according to reports. Doctors told the woman that her contact lenses likely saved her vision" (Fox News 4/23/2021)

Here's one of my all-time favorites:

"Man bowls perfect game with his father's ashes inside the ball."

"Earlier this month, John Hinkle Jr., of Peoria, Illinois, honored the memory of his father, John Hinkle Sr., by achieving that perfect score while using a bowling ball that contained his father's ashes." (CNN 4/26/2021)

Now, of course, we're also all seeing more serious headlines. We hear constant threats of war breaking out around the world:

"China's rapidly growing navy just got 3 new warships in a single day"
(Business Insider)

Those headlines about disease just don't seem to go away. I could pull off large numbers on any single day.

Back in 2016, I saw a headline in the New York Times that pretty much sums up how a lot of people feel:

“Feeling Let Down and Left Behind, With Little Hope for Better”
(New York Times, May 25, 2016)

So, we get daily reports telling us that:

- We’re in an epidemic. And other diseases are still around - You can still die from a heart attack.
- Wars are breaking out around the world.
- Life for some is hopeless.

Now, what is the response of the average person when they see headlines like these? Well, I think it’s pretty normal to get worried. What happens when people get worried? More headlines, of course!

“Study shows that worry is a major factor in heart disease”

So now we’re worried about being worried! I’m not going to read more because you’ve seen them all. It seems like every week someone does a study to demonstrate: 1) That people are worried, 2) that worry is bad for your health and 3) that all you need to do to cure your worry is follow the simple steps in the article.

Now, of course, there is an easy solution to all of this. You can write a song.

Here is a little song I wrote
You might want to sing it note for note
Don't worry be happy
In every life we have some trouble
When you worry you make it double
Don't worry, be happy.
(“Don’t Worry – be happy” by Bobby McFerrin)

So, how do you overcome worry? According to the song, just don’t do it! And this works, right? Well, for many people, no. You can pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile for a little while. But then the worry has a funny way of coming back.

How about some other solutions? You can try to entertain worry away. They say that Hollywood and Broadway made their first big starts during the great depression of the 1930’s because people wanted to escape their worries. You go to the show and you have a good laugh.

Another way to handle worry is to attempt to anesthetize it away with drugs and alcohol. You can try to party it away with all kinds of pleasurable experiences.

Maybe you can try to read it away with a long line of self-help books in the local bookstore. I went to amazon.com and entered the word “worry”. I got over 40,000 Results. That was just Amazon – when I went to Google, I got 996 thousand.

It seems there are lots of people out there who are worried. You know something? This has been going on for a long time. Two-thousand years ago, in the days when Jesus walked the earth, people were worried, too. Jesus had some things to say to his friends who were worried. We’re going to find that the advice that Jesus gave to his friends almost 2000 years ago is just as relevant now as they were back then. Let’s read.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry... (Matthew 6:25)”

There you go! The way to handle worry is: Just don’t do it! Jesus is going to jump on the bandwagon with Bobby McFerrin and start to sing. Right? Well, no. But there’s a reason I stopped here. There is a reason that all the songs make money and all the films from Hollywood sell tickets and all the self-help books sell in the bookstores - There is a germ of truth in them.

We’re going to see that overcoming worry does involve a decision. In fact, several. Do you think it’s possible to decide to stop worrying? This is important: ***Jesus seems to think so.***

As we read what Jesus has to say on this topic, we’ll find that some of it is very practical. Many of the secular books we read can be practical, but what Jesus has to say is different. What makes Jesus different? *He gives us a reason.* He doesn’t just tell us ***what*** to do – he gives us a “*because*”. And it’s a big “*because*”.

I. Understand Why You Shouldn’t Worry

To get us started, we need to understand why we shouldn’t worry. Jesus tells us as we read more:

Matthew 6:25-26

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? 26 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. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Do you ever wonder where all the birds come from? There are lots of them. One study put the number of birds in the world at anywhere from 200 to 400 billion. (GASTON K.J.1; BLACKBURN T.M.2 Source: Biodiversity and Conservation, Volume 6, Number 4, 1997, pp. 615-625(11))

What I want to know is: *How do those birds always find my windshield!?*

There is no shortage of birds. Some are pretty. Some sing beautiful melodies. Some hit our windshields with messy stuff. Listen to this: There is a mechanism put in place by God that feeds them all.

And you know what? Jesus says that you are much more important than they. That's the "because". You don't have to worry because you are highly valued by God.

If you ask Bobby McFerrin why you shouldn't worry he'll just say "well, because you shouldn't! - Don't worry, be happy!" The Greek philosopher Plato said it in a more philosophical way: "Nothing in the affairs of men is worthy of great anxiety." Do you understand what he's saying? You shouldn't worry because nothing really matters. Freddie Mercury and his band "Queen" sang it in the song "Bohemian Rhapsody" - "Nothing really matters; nothing really matters to me."

This thinking is at the core of most self-help plans. I'm not sure if Bobby McFerrin or Freddie Mercury or even Plato let themselves see the implication of this: If nothing really matters, then **YOU** don't really matter.

If you ask Jesus why you shouldn't worry, he answers "because you *matter*." You are highly valued by God.

With this as the foundation, Jesus can give us practical advice with this "best practice".

II. Identify what makes you worry.

It helps if we can identify what makes us worry. In Jesus' day, people were worried about things. Jesus defined what they were worried about. Don't worry about your life – what you will eat or drink. Don't worry about your body – the clothes you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?

In those days, people would say "I don't know if I'll have enough food". Today we don't always get this because we live in a land filled with food. We have supermarkets and convenience stores and restaurants. We have a whole aisle in the supermarket for pet food!

We've discussed this several times in this series: In those days, many people got just enough food to make it one day. To fail to get food for just a few days could possibly put you in danger. Food was a matter of life and death.

I'd like to suggest that the question of whether you live or die is pretty important! Understand this: Because you are valuable, it's pretty important to God, too. Jesus says, "look at the birds. - God feeds them."

When God tells us that he feeds the birds, it's not so much that He's thinking about them as an individual group of creatures. *He's giving us a stepping stone to consider the fact that He is in control of all nature.* The fact that the birds never seem to go away is a tribute to the fact that God has for millennia controlled all of the events of the universe. In one place in the psalms we're told, "He calls the stars by name" (Ps 147:4). The God who controls the courses of the stars can control whether or not the birds get fed every day. And he can control whether you get fed every day. And he says he will, because you are valuable to him You are more valuable than all the birds on the planet.

In the world of Jesus, people might have said, "I'm worried because I may not have clothes". Again, today, we have lots of clothes. In those days, most people had only one set of clothing. In that society a great number of people just lived outside. Having a cloak, or something that to us would be as simple as a small blanket to wrap around yourself meant that you wouldn't be exposed to the cold and the wind.

Jesus identified the things that people of his day worried about. So, why not do that for yourself? Ask yourself some questions:

- What do you worry about?
- Why do you worry about it?
- What do you lose if you don't get it?
- Most important: Which of the things that you might lose is outside of God's power to supply if he thinks you need it?

We are valuable to God, so he will give us what we need - Whether food, or clothing, or protection. And he will often give us much more.

III. Realize that worrying is a behavior rather than an emotion, and that it's an unprofitable behavior.

The next part of this best practice is to realize that worrying is a behavior rather than just an emotion - And, it's a very unprofitable behavior.

Let's read more:

Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? (Matthew 6:27)

A quick note: Some translations, such as the KJV say "...add a cubit to your height". That's the literal word for word translation, but what Jesus is referring to is lifespan.

In other words, Jesus is encouraging his friends to stop and ask, "What does worrying accomplish? Does worrying add any time to your life? A wise man once said, "Worry is like sitting in a rocking chair; it gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you anywhere."

Now at this point, we need to make a distinction: There is legitimate concern, and there is legitimate emotion, and then there is what Jesus is calling worry. Let's talk about those things.

Let's say that a parent sends a child off to a friend's birthday party. A trusted friend who is also a parent is going to drive the child along with theirs. The trusted friend says that they will return the child at 4:00 PM. 4:00 PM rolls around and neither the trusted friend nor the child is not back. Somewhere between one minute and one-half hour later, that parent is on the phone, because they are *concerned*. That's legitimate concern.

Sometimes though, we experience more long-term stresses. Perhaps we get hints that our job is not secure. In response, we sometimes develop a long-term, grinding fear. Sometimes it gets debilitating. Worry is when our fears get out of control and they just spin on and on. They actually prevent us from dealing with our situation.

Jesus tells us to ask, "What is this going to accomplish?" In doing so he is telling us that we have a choice in the matter. We are not victims of our emotions and our attitudes. ***We can choose.***

Legitimate concern leads to action. Are you concerned about your job? Legitimate concern might lead you to ask around to make sure that your concerns are justified. If your concerns are justified, legitimate concern might lead you to polish your resume. Legitimate concern might lead you to evaluate your expenses to make sure you're living within your means and that you're putting some money in the bank.

The world tells us only that we should get control of ourselves because worrying is not productive. The problem is: That's where it stops for them. ***Jesus tells us that we should make the decision to stop worrying because we are highly valuable to God, and he is able and willing to help us.*** Legitimate concern should lead us to pray and ask that God would protect us and provide for us.

Along the way, we can learn another important point:

IV. Realize just how valuable you are.

Now, if we're valuable, we might ask: *How valuable are we?*

Jesus gives us the answer:

28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Matthew 6:28-30)

Solomon was the richest and most powerful King of ancient Israel. It was said that there was so much gold in Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon that silver was not considered valuable. And yet, Jesus says, grass is better dressed than Solomon in all his glory. The grass of the field is surrounded by beautiful flowers. In ancient Israel, when flowers and grass got old, they were gathered and burned to cook food. Here one day, gone tomorrow. Jesus says, if God treats such impermanent things in this way, how much better will he treat his followers.

Then he gives a small rebuke, a small kick: "O you of little faith"

V. Have faith and seek that which is truly valuable.

Based on everything he just said, Jesus tells us to have faith - And to seek that which is truly valuable. Seek that which is eternal.

31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

God promises us that if we seek Him first and foremost, we will have everything that we truly need.

Now, we have to make an important point here. Jesus refers to a group of people called "pagans". In its simplest meaning, that refers to people who don't believe in the God described in the Bible. Other translations say "gentiles", or "other nations."

Nowadays, we don't like to use words like "pagan". It sounds unkind to our modern ears. We prefer to use words like "other world religions" and "other world views".

Well, Jesus used the word "pagan". If you don't like that, I guess you'll have to take it up with him.

You see, people are one of two things. Either you choose to believe in the God described by Jesus and the Bible, or you don't. If you choose to believe, you receive many benefits. Among those benefits: you can stop worrying. If you choose otherwise, you still receive **some** good things. For example, we're told in another place that God sends his rain on the righteous and unrighteous. But beyond that, there are no guarantees.

What is life for a "Pagan"?

Many people believe there are lots of gods. These beings control our universe. They're hard to live with, because they act in strange ways. The gods have trouble making up their minds. One minute, they like you. The next, well, you had better watch out! Sometimes they get into fights, and humans get stuck in the middle. The way to keep yourself in good favor with the gods is to buy them off. You offer sacrifices of all kinds with the hopes that the gods will be pleased. Problem: You never quite know when you've given enough. So, you never know when you might make the gods angry. Life is like living on a rat's wheel – you keep giving and giving and giving, but you never know when you're done.

Some people think the God of the Bible works that way. Those people live a life of constantly striving to do good things. But they still worry that it's not enough. That's called pursuing your own righteousness. Fortunately, that's not how God works at all.

That's why Jesus tells us to seek God's righteousness, not our own. When people accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ through faith, God not only forgives their sins, but he then goes on to give us the righteousness of Christ. We're told that we are clothed in this righteousness. And that's enough. So, we never have to worry again - About anything. We don't need to worry about losing God's love or our place in eternity.

Here's some final advice from Jesus on this topic:

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.
Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:34)

Do you find yourself lying in bed at night with your thoughts spinning around in your head? Jesus says, “don’t do that”. I heard someone suggest that before you go to bed, write down the things that you need to take care of tomorrow. Pray about your list. Realize that there is nothing more you can do. Then, go to sleep.

Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Here’s where we get a few reminders: In the last few sessions, we’ve been reminded that Jesus is not encouraging us to be lazy. Martin Luther once said, “Yes, God feeds the birds. But he doesn’t drop the food into their beaks.” We work, and we ask God to bless our work.

This also doesn’t mean we will live the lifestyle we wish. We are promised enough food to eat and enough clothes to wear. As long as God has a purpose for us on this earth, we’ll have what he thinks we need. When our job is done, we go to a wonderful eternity with him in heaven.

Finally, it doesn’t mean we’re promised a carefree life. Each day will have some level of trouble. We are not promised a life with no trouble. We are promised that our Lord highly values us. He will provide and protect.

Therefore, don’t worry about tomorrow. That phrase has saved me a lot of anxiety over the years.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

How should followers of Jesus handle worry? Realize that you are highly valued by God. Define what you’re concerned about. Ask yourself: What can you lose that is outside of God’s control? Realize just how valuable you are.

Realize that the alternative is the life of those who don’t believe. We said in the last session that we cannot serve two masters. We said the God of the Scripture is the God of life – the other voices are the god of death. Well, the God of the Scripture is also the God of confidence and hope. The other gods are the voices of fear and worry.

Live day to day knowing that the Creator of the heavens and the earth is able and willing to take care of you.

*“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.”*