

The Ultimate Priority

Matthew 6:25-34

I find myself this afternoon with a very difficult passage upon which to preach. The difficulty is not in the interpretation, for the meaning is quite plain. The difficulty is not in trying to make the passage clear by explanation, because probably all of you are familiar with this passage and understand just how clear it already is. And the difficulty is not in figuring out the practical applications, because those applications are explicitly stated within the text itself.

I don't have any trouble understanding, explaining or applying this text. So what's the problem? Really, my difficulty is two-fold. First, you all know this passage very well, and therefore it is very difficult to make it strike you with all the effectiveness of Jesus' words to his disciples. Ho hum, nothing new and fresh here. Nothing profound. No great insights to add to anything you have already known and learned before. Familiar passages are often the hardest to preach well, because you all know all there is to know about the passage. Familiarity can easily breed a casual sense of "been there, done that..." My first problem is familiarity.

And the second problem is in making these applications in a way that is personal and penetrating, but not just nagging reminders of things you already know but just don't yet fully apply to your own life. The difficulty is in going beyond what is a merely simplistic exhortation, going beyond what is so often received or perceived as moralistic or even legalistic.

Negatively, that exhortation is, "Do not be anxious." "Don't worry about your life...Don't worry about the future." Positively, of course, Jesus' words are these, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

So how do I say those things to you, when your life is uncertain? When the troubles of today really are overwhelming and the burdens for tomorrow are deeply troublesome? Don't worry. Don't be anxious. But you do worry, and you are anxious. That's my struggle in preaching this afternoon, to get beyond that obvious impasse. And I want to begin with something of an explanation. A defense of Jesus' exhortations built upon something of a logical argument. Now, I don't mean "logical" in the sense of "cold, hard, uncaring logic." I don't mean "logical" to imply a merely intellectual hardness by which all the problems of life are explained away as an engineer might build a bridge. Life is not that simple, and life's problems cannot be solved by mere logic, as if the right argument will simply cause all your problems to disappear.

But I do mean logical in the way that Jesus explains his own words. And that begins with a declaration of,

I. THE DANGERS OF ANXIETY.

Even as I begin, I realize there are physical issues associated with anxiety, and for some people those physical issues are very acute. But since we are whole, unified persons, the body and the soul are connected. Interconnected. So I'm not saying that you should never see a doctor for high blood pressure caused by anxiety, nor even that you should never take medication designed to reduced anxiety. But I will say this, anxiety is not merely a matter of the physical body. The propensity to worry is not merely a physical problem to be addressed by physical remedies. As a physician would attend to those physical matters of medicine, the minister of the gospel should address you as a physician of your soul, and so the word of God speaks to the issue.

In that context,

v.25

It is a prohibition. A command, an exhortation. The point is emphasized throughout the text.

v.31 “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”

v.34 “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things.”

We see the same exhortation in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Phil. 4:6 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

So let me be rather straightforward today, as we study some very straightforward and practical instructions from our Lord Jesus himself. First,

A. You need to gain the right perspective on what is important in life.

Priorities. Values, as we would put it today. What is important? And, what sorts of things really aren’t that important? So Jesus teaches his people not to worry about what you will eat and what clothes you will wear.

v.25

Now, on the surface, that seems rather uncaring. After all, most people would identify food and clothing as the two most important essentials of life. Life actually is all about food and clothing. Jesus is, I believe, intentionally getting to the very heart of the matter, by identifying these essentials, because these are physical essentials. These are the necessary elements in terms of our outward and external experience of life in the flesh. And the point is, life isn’t only about our physical existence. Life is

more than your physical existence. In fact, the more important matters of life are not physical at all. They don’t have to do with your body, but your soul.

So what really is important in life? Answer, the care and nurture of your soul. The well-being of your soul. The health and vitality of your soul in relationship to God.

Now, this isn’t an example of Greek dualism, following Plato, where the body loses all importance entirely, where the goal of life is essentially to escape from the prison of the physical body, as if the physical body is evil and the goal of righteousness is to live in the realm of the spiritual. That’s not it. We exist as body and soul together, inseparably joined together. But the priority of that which is important lies in the spiritual realm.

What you eat doesn’t matter. So don’t worry about food. Even what you wear doesn’t matter. So don’t worry about your clothes. There are far more important things that require your attention and your devotion. So please search your own hearts, and ask God to help you identify and recognize ways in which you have not preserved that proper perspective, ways in which the things of this world, even those things necessary for live, have become more important than the things of the Lord. A right perspective on what is important in life. Secondly,

B. You need to gain the right perspective on your identity.

And what I mean by that is that your identity is defined by your relationship to God, a personal and intimate relationship with God in which He treasures you as a human being more than anything else in his creation. God relates to you as a Father to his children, with a personal and compassionate interest.

So to gain the right perspective on your identity, just consider

the birds.
v.26

God takes care of the birds. And you, beloved, are not birds.
You are beloved children. Consider the pretty flowers as well.
v.28-29

The idea is simple. God takes care of the flowers and the birds, because he is God and because he is good. He takes care of them with some splendor. The lilies are absolutely beautiful. The birds of the air always have plentiful food. “Are you not of more value than they?” It’s an argument from the lessor to the greater.
v.30

The words, actually, are quite precious. And the application is plain,
v.31-32

“Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” That’s your identity, living as the object of your Father’s love. And that takes care of everything else. Third,

C. You need to acknowledge the emptiness of anxiety.

In other words, it doesn’t do any good to worry. In fact, as even the medical profession will tell us with clinical precision, worrying will harm you. The stress of worry can kill you. Anxiety can paralyze you. It can make you sick. It can reduce the length of your life, and reduce the quality of your life.

You can measure it, in blood pressure. In many neurological ailments, some auto-immune diseases, even in otherwise “normal” and ordinary diseases, stress becomes the trigger point. It can cause insomnia, make you vulnerable to virus infections,

and create all sorts of complications of diabetes. And heart disease. Anxiety might not be the cause of the disease, but it certainly becomes the enabler.

What does Jesus say?
v.27

So worrying is self-destructive. Anxiety is harmful. In and of itself, that isn’t the automatic cure, especially when the worry of anxiety has prompted medical and physical symptoms, but this acknowledgement has to be an obvious application of Jesus’ words. Worry is empty, useless. It accomplishes nothing, and actually, causes harm. So along with that acknowledgement, in a positive sense,

D. You need to nurture your ability to live by faith.

Your identity, as we looked at it just a few minutes ago, is tied to your faith. And the unwillingness to recognize God’s providential care justifies that gentle and compassionate rebuke from Jesus, “O you of little faith.” Those words are not a condemnation, but surely they are correction, a soft reproof. And they identify the root of the problem of anxiety, which is spiritual. So Jesus calls his disciples to exercise the faith by which they would accept the goodness of God as the expression of his benevolent love.

Worry is, in a practical experience, a denial of faith. Anxiety reflects the absence of much faith, again Jesus’ words, “You of little faith.” Anxiety leaves no room for faith. Worry chokes out the strength of faith. Eventually, if left unchecked, the anxiety will simply replace the faith altogether.

So we must live by faith. Not by the sight of our own wisdom, or by the strength of our own sight. That becomes descriptive of the whole of our lives in the flesh.

2 Cor. 5:7 "...for we walk by faith, not by sight."

Or, Gal. 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

One final part of Jesus' instructions to his disciples, and to us,

E. You need to practice living in the present.
v.34

The danger of this verse is that you can remove it from the context of the gospel, and simply promote a truism. A moralistic maxim for successful living. Perhaps that secular phrase would be most well known and popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous, "One day at a time." Live one day at a time. Take care of today. In the context of AA, count your sobriety today. Deal with today. Count today. Don't worry about tomorrow.

Actually, that is all true, but Jesus is saying more than that. In this context, Jesus is telling us to put away worry about tomorrow because God is the author of tomorrow. He is exhorting us to deal with the present matters which God, in his providence, has revealed in the circumstances of your life. And the future belongs to the Lord.

Deut. 29:29 "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

In other words, don't try to figure out God's secret will. Don't try to figure out what God hasn't revealed yet. Don't worry about things that are of none of your concern. Live before God in the present.

"Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." "Each day has enough trouble of its own." So beware the danger of worrying about what is still future.

But how? How does that become practical for us? I believe the answer to that question lies in the verse I have thus far skipped,
v.33

Life is a matter of priorities, and the first priority must remain the first priority.

II. THE FIRST PRIORITY.

The ultimate priority. Specifically,

A. The priority of the kingdom of God.
v.33 "Seek first the kingdom of God."

So what does that mean? It begins with a call, a challenge, an exhortation. Seek! As Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it, "Seek carries the meaning of seeking earnestly, seeking intensely, living for it. And He even enforces it by adding another word, 'first'. Seek ye first. That means, generally, principally, above everything else; give that priority."

Further, "Many Christian people miss so many blessings in this life because they do not seek God diligently. They do not spend much time in seeking his face... It means that we must think more about the kingdom and our relationship to God, and especially about our eternal future."

So evaluate yourself. Evaluate your own life, your own walk with the Lord. What do you seek, first? Most? What is of first priority?

The danger, and I might add, the temptation, is to seek first the things of this world. And not just the pleasures of this world, as tempting as that might be, but also even the necessities of this world. We spend a lot of time and energy in the pursuit of this world's existence, food and clothing. We spend a lot of time and energy in the pursuit of goals that are focused entirely upon this world. Worldly success. Worldly prosperity. Worldly security. And Jesus says that is a wrong priority. "Seek first his kingdom."

So commit yourself to life in that kingdom, to the work of that kingdom. That would include your place on the Lord's Day in the Lord's house delighting in his presence and singing his praise. That would include your daily commitment to prayer and reading the Bible, seeking first even in your prayers those matters of eternal significance, those matters most closely related to the building of God's kingdom. The Lord's Prayer reflects that priority. First are the petitions, "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." All of that before, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Seek first, beloved, seek first what is of God. Seek first what is related to the Kingdom of God. Seek first what matters in regard to your relationship with God. That's how you overcome worry and anxiety. Verse 33 picks up the thought begun in verse 25,

v.25 "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?...33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

That doesn't mean that you quit your job and take a vow of poverty. It doesn't mean that the things of this world are evil in

and of themselves. But it does mean the priority of your heart and soul is well established and well defined. Seek first the kingdom of God. And his righteousness.

There is,

B. The priority of the righteousness of God.

This is very closely related, because as your first priority becomes the kingdom of God, you will seek to live in that kingdom. And life in the kingdom of God is a life of righteousness. Holiness. Seeking to be like Jesus, growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord.

Remember the words earlier in the sermon on the mount, Mat. 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled."

Truly, truly those who seek first the kingdom of God are those who seek to live their lives according to God's perfect commandments. And let me emphasize, this is anything but legalism. Legalism is seeking to be righteous in order to earn your standing before God, seeking to be righteous in order to atone for your own sins. And that is an impossible task.

But this priority of seeking first the righteousness of God is the right and proper response of the Christian to the promise of the gospel, in line with what Peter writes in,

1 Peter 2:24 "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness."

Similarly the warning of,

1 John 3:10 "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."

Indeed, this practice of righteousness is the ultimate goal of all that the Bible teaches.

2 Tim. 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

So what about you? Where is the priority of righteousness? The priority and the goal of holiness. Godliness. Obedience. Practical, personal, persistent righteousness. And with that priority, don't worry about tomorrow. Instead, pursue the righteousness of God in your life today. And I will let Jesus' words speak for themselves,

v.33 “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”