

“A Break from Anxiety”

Matthew 6:25-31

Second in the Series: Destress Your Fest

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Thanksgiving and Christmas are always crazy busy. There's baking and shopping and money to spend. There are parties to host and shows to attend. There are Christmas cards and packages to send. The most wonderful time of the year? Yes. But it's also the most stressful time of the year. And a lot of that stress falls on Moms. Take for example one woman who invited too many guests over for a Thanksgiving dinner. The potatoes boiled over on the stove. The baby was crying. The dog got into the appetizers. So when six-year-old Rachel asked for help coloring a picture of a Turkey, Mom just lost it. But she was able to get it together by the time the guests arrived. It all looked perfect. As everyone sat down at the table, Mom turned to Rachel and said, "Honey would you like to say the blessing?" "I don't know what to say," the girl replied. "Just say what you hear Mommy say," Mom answered. The daughter bowed her head and said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

There's a lot of pressure to hold it together during the holiday season. Perhaps you feel like one of those beautifully wrapped gifts that decorate front porches: you look good on the outside but feel empty within. We want to help you take a break from anxiety and receive God's peace now and in the New Year.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) the most common mental health disorder in the United States in 2025 is Anxiety. This can include anything from PTSD to various phobias to separation anxiety, panic attacks and obsessive-compulsive disorders. 40 million people (19 %) of US adults had an anxiety disorder in the past year. Adults aged 18–29 are more likely to experience anxiety than any other age group. 60 million adults (29%) have some form of mental illness. But only half of these are receiving help. So where are they turning? AI. The #1 use of ChatGPT in 2025 is companionship and therapy. 31% of teens say they prefer AI to human companionship.

This highlights another holiday malady: loneliness. It's reported that half of U.S. adults feel lonely. In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy declared loneliness a public health epidemic. He said loneliness impacts your health and life in the same way as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. When clinical psychologist James Sells of Regent University heard that hurting people are turning to ChatGPT for help it reminded him of the time when, as a child, he asked his parents for a puppy. Instead, they gave him a stuffed animal. He replied, "But I want something with a heartbeat."

We need someone with a heartbeat to hear what's going on in our hearts. And we need help from the One who formed our hearts, who knows our hearts, who heals our hearts. I want to help you destress your fests but please remember – nothing I am about to say is a replacement for seeking professional and medical help for anxiety or other mental health illnesses. The Church is not in competition with counselors. We are partners.

So let's look at what makes you stressed, anxious and lonely this time of year. This week I asked members of my Growth Groups, people in the lobby, even the receptionists at the dentist what causes them stress. Here are some of the things I heard:
Financial Pressure: The cost of gifts, travel, food, and decorations can cause many to spend more than they can afford.

Unrealistic Expectations: we get disappointed and discouraged when we try and fail to make everyone happy.

Family Dynamics: Getting together can reveal buried tension, unresolved conflicts, difficult personalities and old family issues.

Overwhelming Schedule: Balancing work deadlines, shopping, hosting duties, school events, and social gatherings can make even a marathon runner feel fatigued.

Grief and Loneliness: Sadness is magnified by the holidays if you've lost a loved one or feel isolated from family and friends.

Which of these are on your holiday list? Perhaps the one quality which underlies them all is a Lack of Control. My finances, family, friends, foes, future and a thousand other factors are often beyond my control. Fear is a natural reaction to out-of-control circumstances. Worry and stress, however, are optional, at least according to Jesus.

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 than food, and the body more than clothes? 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? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Matthew 6:25-27

Now you may say, "Jesus, that's nice for the birds and the grass. But I don't want to wear petals and live on worms. That's why I worry about basic things such as food and clothing. That's why I worry about complicated things like school, work, family and the future." It's easy to misunderstand Jesus' point. He does not say become like the birds and the grass. He does not say, "Lie back and do nothing. Let God do the work." Rather He tells us to sow, reap, store, spin, and do whatever labor we do, but don't worry about it. Fear that leads to a positive action, that deals with a problem, is helpful. Fear that paralyzes you in worry and anxiety does no good.

That's the first lesson of this passage: ***Worry is Worthless***. It accomplishes nothing. Jesus points out, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27) "Worry" comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word that means to strangle or choke. Worry "chokes" the life out of you. It steals your strength and prevents you from solving your problem. Someone has said, "Worry is like a rocking chair, it gives you something to do but doesn't get you anywhere."¹ Someone else has said, "Worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles."

¹ Chuck Swindoll, Questions Christians Ask p. 18.

One study claims 40% of an average person's anxiety is focused on things that will never happen, 30% on things in the past you can't change, 12% on criticism by others which are mostly untrue, 10% on their health which gets worse with stress and 8% on real problems you face. Your efforts would be more effective if you could get rid of the 92% that is focused on empty things and concentrate on fixing the real problems.

One cause of stress is **Outside Pressures**. You're hosting 40 people for Thanksgiving, you were just assigned three crucial projects to complete before Christmas, your child is having major problems at school, your parents are heading toward divorce, you just got the diagnosis from the doctor. Outside Pressures are stressful because they are tough, sometimes impossible, to control. If they were simple and solvable, you would do it. Usually, there are some steps you can take to make progress. According to Jesus, the thing to avoid is worry. It doesn't help the situation, it doesn't solve the problem. It only strangles you and steals your energy. Worry is worthless.

Second, *You are Valuable*. Jesus asks, "Are you not much more valuable than (the birds and the grass)" (Matthew 6:26) to your heavenly Father? "Your heavenly Father knows that you need (these necessities of life)" Matthew 6:32. The other side of stress is **Inside Pleasing**. We want to give the perfect gift, lay out the perfect Thanksgiving dinner, give a perfect performance in the school concert or in the playoff game so we will please people. I want them to be happy, to like me, to value me.

What's wrong with this? You know. It is impossible to please people. For all your stress and effort, what you get in return is: "That's not the gift I wanted" or "This Turkey is too dry" or "Your solo was a little flat" or "You need to try harder for that goal next time." A tremendous amount of stress has its roots in our need to please. We want to be validated and valued. And it's never enough. We always need to earn more "A"s - approval, applause, affirmation, appreciation, affection. Instead what we get are "F"s - we feel frustrated, forgotten, like a failure. I'm not telling you what you don't already know. More people pleasing will not fill our inner need for love.

We must look up and receive our true worth from God. Paul says,
 ... God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:5

You are precious in His eyes. God can take care of the supernova and the sparrow. And you are more valuable. How do I know? He gave His Son for you. When you pay that price for something, you'll do everything in your power to protect it and keep it.

And that's why the third lesson is: *Make God Your Priority*. Jesus concludes, So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Matthew 6:31-34

How do you seek first His Kingdom? By turning your worries and concerns over to God and asking Him to show you how to handle the situation. In some cases the answer is easy. In others, the answer is clear but it takes courage to do it. In some areas, God's will is not certain – that's usually a sign to wait for further instructions.

When you think about it, that's the best way to live. It is always better to place every anxious situation in God's hands than to hang onto it yourself. Mary C. Crowley says, "Every evening I turn worries over to God. He's going to be up all night anyway."

I visited an office this week and happened to ask the two women working behind the counter how they deal with stress. One of them said, "I wake up worried every morning about the state of the world. Just when I think it can't get worse, it does!" "How do you handle your worry?" I asked. "I don't know," she replied, "I try to reach out to whatever energy is out there in the universe." Her coworker took a different approach. She said, "The first verse I memorized is: 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'" (Philippians 4:6-7). Don't hang on to anything. Let go and let God have it. In exchange, He will give you His inexplicable peace. Paul knew what he was talking about. He wrote those words from a Roman dungeon on death row.

God's peace grows in the simple rhythms you repeat each day and each week. These practices are a good defense against burnout:

1. **Talk with God Daily** - When you regularly seek God first with prayer and Scripture, it shrinks other duties down to size and makes them more manageable.
2. **Prioritize and Say "No"** It is okay to decline invitations or traditions that cause too much stress. Focus on the activities that genuinely bring you joy.
3. **Shut Off the Screens** - Stepping away from screens each week helps your soul breathe. It reconnects you to God and people.
4. **Set Realistic Expectations** - Aim for a "good enough" holiday rather than perfection. Focus on time with loved ones rather than gifts or elaborate decorations.
5. **Be Grateful** - A simple rhythm of gratitude can help you release the day to God.
6. **Seek Support** - Connect with one life-giving relationship each week. Time with a trusted friend or coach refuels you. If stress, anxiety, or depression feel unmanageable, consider reaching out to a mental health professional.

Burnout doesn't arrive overnight; neither does strength. Small rhythms strengthen you to face whatever anxieties are up ahead.²

Bertha and Paul Collins are learning the hard way to turn all their anxieties over to the Lord. Chief among their worries: their son William. As a young teen he started using drugs. "Despite therapy and repeated rehabilitations, despite Christian summer camp and a welcoming church, despite a successful stint in the Army Reserve and even the prayer and laying-on of hands by his parents, William never

²Bob Logan – 5 Rhythms that keep you focused on what matters most

resisted the lure of cheap crack for long. He would find a job and lose it, disappear for months, and then show up on the family's South Philadelphia doorstep."

As cocaine's stranglehold on William became apparent, his parents prayed. "It got to the point where we couldn't change him," his father Paul said, "so we asked the Lord to strengthen us to deal with his addiction."

"After they prayed, things quickly got worse: A police detective arrived at their door bearing a photograph of their son, suspecting he was involved in a robbery. The picture shocked them. They hadn't seen him in more than six months. "You don't know what it is to see your son, a healthy young man, become a skeleton – to see how beat up he was, how sick he was. It was like everything was just drained out of him," said his mother Bertha. "At the trial, I prayed, 'Whatever you want for him,' and when they said he was guilty, I thought, 'then that's what You want for him.'" Now she asks God to open his eyes and to do whatever it takes to save and deliver him.

Recently, William wrote this letter, "It has been a long road. The only thing that keeps me going is prayer. I pray first thing in the morning and the last thing before I go to bed. During the day, I always ask God to give me enough strength to make it through the day. My number one prayer is to keep me off drugs. If I keep praying for these things and always keep God first in my life, I will prevail."

Paul and Bertha Collins still have questions and doubts. They still get angry. But they pray about it and keep going. They don't blame themselves or God and their troubles have strengthened their faith. Bertha says, "I know that somewhere along the way, God will reveal why things have gone the way they have." But for now they are living for God. And that gives them hope.³

Why not take a break from worry this week – before worry breaks you?

³ Mary Beth McCauley, "Finding a Way to Cope with Son's Addiction," Philadelphia Inquirer