

The Sermon on the Mount: Worry vs. Contentment
Matthew 6:24-34
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Who would admit that they at least occasionally experience worry first-hand? Who admits that you've lost sleep because of worrying about something? What kinds of things do you worry about?

According to Wikipedia, worry refers to the thoughts, images and emotions of a negative nature in which mental attempts are made to avoid anticipated potential threats. As an emotion it is experienced as anxiety or concern about a real or imagined issue, often personal issues such as health or finances, or broader issues such as environmental pollution or social or technological change. Most people experience short-lived periods of worry in their lives without incident; indeed, a moderate amount of worrying may even have positive effects, if it prompts people to take precautions (e.g., fastening their seat belt or buying fire insurance) or avoid risky behaviors (e.g., angering dangerous animals or binge drinking). Excessive worry is a different matter and is the primary diagnostic feature of generalized anxiety disorder.

In today's text Jesus asks an interesting question about worry. "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" Now, in the context of his sermon, Jesus clearly intended that as a rhetorical question, and he expected his audience to answer with a resounding "No." But, what if we asked the question a bit more analytically? What kind of answer might we find? You probably won't be surprised to learn that a scientific study has been done that looks at how a person's outlook impacts his/her life. The results of the study were published ten years ago in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings medical journal. The subjects of the study were 7000 students from UNC Chapel Hill who were followed for 40 years. The students were categorized somewhere along the continuum between being optimists and pessimists, and it was discovered that the pessimists had a significantly greater likelihood of dying sooner from any cause than did the optimists.

Of course, pessimism and worry are not identical, but they are often related. Pessimism is the tendency to take a gloomy view of life and assume that most things ultimately move toward negative outcomes. Worry is a mental and emotional response to threats, vague and unspecified or known and specific. To

describe the difference another way, we could say that pessimism is an outlook about things in general and worry is a response to possibilities in particular.

I suppose it is possible to be a pessimist without being a worrier, but they share the same root. Both pessimism and worry stem from a lack of hope and trust. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls us over and over again to a life of trusting God. He's outside, teaching from a hillside, and in his surroundings there are two perfect sermon illustrations. He points to the birds that do not sow or reap but are fed by the heavenly Father nonetheless. He points to the flowers that do not toil yet are clothed in beauty by the heavenly Father anyway.

Remember that Jesus is speaking to people who *did* have to sow, reap, toil and spin, and he wasn't telling them to stop doing those tasks. He simply wanted them to understand that their lives were a lot more than the sum of their work and sweat and effort—or, for that matter, the length of their social media profile or how many likes they receive.

Furthermore, Jesus ties the call to not worry to the kingdom of God. “Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” That’s a significant link because God’s kingdom is the ultimate reason for optimism and hope. The very meaning of the kingdom is that God and all those who stand with God ultimately win. In the end, good triumphs over evil. In the end suffering, disparity and lack give way to justice, equity and plenty. In the end death will not separate us from the people we love.

As children of God and citizens of God’s kingdom, we might be pessimistic about human activity in the short run, but hope is the only faithful option for the long run because God and God’s kingdom will reign. Jesus made that very point when he said in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

By bringing the kingdom of God into the discussion, Jesus reminds us that ultimately, we have nothing to worry about. But, the truth is, that isn't how we experience life most days, is it? As we honestly shared at the beginning, we do worry, and it feels to us that we have some legitimate things to worry about. We object to Jesus' admonition on practical, if not theological grounds. Maybe Jesus is just a bit out of touch. Who can go through life without worrying?

Objection #1: A good bit of what we worry about isn't the long-term issues, anyway. Most people, don't, for example, fret away their days worrying about

how global warming is affecting us. We seldom think, much less worry, about how the world will end. While we do think about whether we'll have enough money in retirement, most 20 year olds aren't losing any sleep over that. It's not until we're in our 50's or older that that becomes a burning issue.

Most of the time we're worrying over much shorter-term issues like, "Will I get a good report from the doctor?" or "Will my kids stay out of trouble?" or "Am I parenting well?" or "Will I be able to pay my bills if my hours are cut at work?" Even for those who are not usually inclined to be pessimistic, we can become pessimistic about the dire possibilities our worry leads us to brood about.

Objection #2: Worry is unavoidable when we love people. It is certainly true that we will be concerned about people we care about. But, there is a difference between bearing one another's burdens in a healthy way and confusing worry with love itself, as if the two are synonyms. They aren't, though that would come as news to a lot of people, especially where I come from, where if you don't worry about and feed someone, you obviously don't like the person very much.

Objection #3: Jesus is so logical in what he says about worry—*too* logical. It is the very height of reasonableness for him to say, in essence, "Since you trust God that all things will ultimately work out for good, and since you trust that God cares for you even more than birds and flowers, you have no reason to worry about food or clothing or anything else."

The problem is that logic doesn't always rule, especially when it comes to worry. We cannot neatly compartmentalize anxiety and then talk ourselves out of it. Some worry tends to persist despite logical reasoning, because it's based more in our emotions than in our thinking. And, so it chatters at us, saying, "This may not work out, that could fall short, so and so may mess this up, I may not have anticipated every contingency or obstacle, whatever can go wrong probably will." Our minds get in a loop, processing these kinds of thoughts over and over, building up dread and leaving us tense and anxious. It just doesn't seem to be as easy as Jesus makes it sound, this not worrying business.

But, what our objections tells us is that we have missed the heart of what Jesus is talking about. This was not his dissertation on worry. This is not his Dr. Phil moment in the sun where he gives us a prescription for how to avoid all anxiety. His main point is, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." *Strive* for it, he says.

To strive for something means to exert a lot of energy and effort toward a goal. Jesus didn't say we should rely on the eventual coming of God's kingdom as an antidote to daily worry. Instead, we are to actively work for the spread of the kingdom. And, here's the thing: as we do that, some of the things we fret about are going to become non-issues. Our heads and our emotions are going to be busily engaged in affairs that are far more important, far more immediate, and that's not going to leave us as much time or mental or emotional space for some of our self-inflicted anxiety.

None of this is to say that we won't still have some worries. We are, of course, concerned about people we love, about their health and safety and welfare. If we are at all sensitive to the world around us, we will be concerned about whether we have done all we need to do to alleviate the suffering of our fellow human beings and of our planet. But, there's a difference between worry and concern. When I "googled" worry, 440,000,000 hits appeared. One of them was an online dictionary which had a couple of definitions that I think gets at the heart of Jesus' message. According to Merriam-Webster: to worry, as a verb, is to harass by tearing, biting or snapping especially at the throat. It is to shake or pull at with the teeth, like a terrier worrying a rat. It is also to touch or disturb something repeatedly.

Those definitions present a picture of actively courting worry, of making room for it to gain power over our minds and emotions until it chokes the joy out of life. Jesus offers us another way. When we are focused on the kingdom of God and when we hold to the promise of God's care and providence with confidence, hope has a chance to take hold rather than worry and fear.

Dr. Edward Hallowell is a psychologist who taught at Harvard for more than 20 years. In an article in *Psychology Today* he wrote that one of the most powerful, effective tools to use when combatting worry is prayer. "Talk to God," he said, "when you feel worried....Brain scans and EEG monitors show beneficial changes in the brain during meditation and prayer. The changes correlate with most of our measure of improved health, including longevity, and reduced incidence of illness."

You cannot add to your lifespan by worrying, but you very well might by opening yourself to the hope that is rooted in God's kingdom. Knowing how our story ends unleashes great power that flows back to our daily lives, because we know and trust in God's work on our behalf and on behalf of the Kingdom. Amen