

Prayer

Dear Father,

You are sovereign over all things, the nations, the economy, the climate, indeed all things are under your feet. You are my God, my Saviour and my Friend who loves me, guides me, admonishes me according to your perfect ways, for my benefit and your glory.

Your forgiveness, tender-mercy and loving-kindness cause me to be overwhelmed with gratitude; you my God have condescended to reach down to me to restore me to yourself, even to adopt me as your own child. Accept my love, thanksgiving and praise in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Song: (MHB 92) *by C Wesley*

1. Jesus, the name high over all in hell or earth or sky
Angels and men before it fall and devils fear and fly
2. Jesus, the name to sinners dear, the name to sinners given
It scatters all their guilty fear and turns their hell to heaven
3. O, that the world might taste and see the riches of His grace
The arms of love that compass me would all the world embrace
4. Jesus, the prisoner's fetters breaks, and bruises Satan's head
Power into strengthless souls it speaks and life into the dead
5. His only righteousness I show, His saving truth proclaim
Tis all my business here below to cry "Behold the Lamb"
6. Happy, if with my latest breath I may but gasp His name
Preach Him to all, and cry in death "Behold, behold the Lamb"

© public domain

Scripture

- Matthew 6:25-34
- Luke 10:38-42

Message: Seek God's Kingdom First

The reading from Matthew comes from the so called Sermon on the Mount, one of the most profound and sublime messages ever presented. This particular section that we are focusing on today is well known, but can easily be incorrectly summarized as simply "Do Not Worry", which is how the NIV heads it. Even to say "Do no worry because God is in control" would not be accurate. So what does this passage tell us?

The first thing we could say is that the reason our Lord tells us not to worry is because we do! Paul tells us not be anxious about anything because we have a tendency to be anxious

about many things. Peter tells us to cast our cares upon Him because we have many cares. So we are told don't worry!

The natural response to "do not worry" is to say "But you don't understand how serious the issue is" or even more emphatically "Who do you think you are to tell me not to worry?"

But the second and more important thing to note is that the instruction "do not worry" must never be taken in isolation. Jesus tied it to a command, and the two must not be separated.

Mental health workers tell of the debilitating effects worry has on life: depression, cognitive impairment, unhealthy coping mechanisms, sleep deprivation, activation of "fight or flight" response, lower resistance to illness, high blood pressure, appetite changes, tight muscles and, more.

They also tell us what we are most likely to worry about: Health, finances, job stability and performance, relationships and conflict, the future, world events, social acceptance, personal safety, global security, aging, climate change, political instability and parenting, just to list the most common issues.

And they will tell us what we should do to combat worry: Challenge negative thoughts, meditate, limit exposure to information, talk to someone you trust, keep active.

All of this is true and the advice given is pretty sound, much of it consistent with Biblical principles. So we don't have an issue with this so far.

But what Jesus presents as the way to overcome worry is completely outside the square, something our professional advisors would never consider as an effective way to deal with this deeply personal yet world-wide pandemic of worry and anxiety.

Interestingly, Jesus lists just three things that people ("Gentiles") worry about:

- Where's the food going to come from? (What shall we eat?)
- Will there be enough water? (What shall we drink?)
- Is my wardrobe adequate? (What shall we wear?)

(Jesus' reference to Gentiles here implies that God's people can be free of worry.)

Jesus presents a radical two-fold solution:

1. Seek first God's Kingdom, and
2. Seek first God's righteousness.

And this is the focus of today's message. It is NOT "don't worry". It is to seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness as of first importance. When that is the priority and the lifestyle then anxiety and worry dissipate. Jesus said so.

It is somewhat academic to separate the seeking of God's Kingdom and the seeking of His righteousness because the two statements are different sides of the same coin. The same duality is found in other statements by Jesus: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" and "If you love me you will keep my commandments".

Seek God's Kingdom First

Seeking God's Kingdom is directly connected with the attitude of heart and with your basic desires in life. It is to turn your eyes upon Jesus and to look full in his wonderful face. It is to delight in his law. It is to have your actions motivated by a love for God and neighbour. It's a commitment to walk in holiness, in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

It might help to review what is meant by the Kingdom of God. It is a spiritual kingdom. "It's not of this world"¹, Jesus said. It is a monarchy with a king, a constitution, law, citizens, enemies, an army, industrial policy, ambassadors and a library.

This Kingdom is worth seeking. It is the source of all that is good. It has a glory and wonder that those writers of Scripture who had the privilege of seeing aspects of it had great difficulty in using words to describe it. One such person was even forbidden to write down what he saw². So great is the glory of that place that we need a new body, a glorified body, to bear it's weight.

To seek this Kingdom is to humble yourself before the Living God. It is to call out to God in Christ for mercy which is freely extended. It is to love the Lord God with heart, soul, mind and strength. It is to enjoy His presence and his loving kindness. It is to submit to Him and hand everything over to His good will and pleasure. It is to love your neighbour.

And what about seeking His righteousness? What does that mean? Most will know that "righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."³ It is a gift. But you do yourself a disservice if you think that seeking God's righteousness is achieved only by agreeing with that. Righteous is certainly how God sees his children, but to "seek God's righteousness" is very much tied to what you do. Jesus said so. He taught us to say "Thy will be done" and he told us "keep my commandments"⁴. It is dying to self⁵. It is living a life worthy of the calling to which he has called us⁶. It is doing everything as unto the Lord⁷. It is doing good to all people⁸. It is treating others as being better than yourself⁹. It is keeping your word.¹⁰ It is obeying the law of Christ¹¹. Doing this is to seek after God's righteousness and therefore to be free of anxiety and worry.

Look at the ordinary and simple example of Mary in our second reading. The preparation of food and other duties are important, but at that moment, something more important was at hand. She put aside the things that Martha was anxious about and attended to the more important, the seeking of another kingdom and the doing of righteousness. Consequently she received the Lord's commendation and blessing, and we can be confident that the other things were given to her as well. May it also be the case with us.

¹ John 18:36

² 2 Corinthians 12:4

³ Romans 3:22

⁴ John 14:15

⁵ Galatians 2:20

⁶ Ephesians 4:1

⁷ Colossians 3:23

⁸ Galatians 6:10

⁹ Philippians 2:3

¹⁰ Matthew 5:37

¹¹ Galatians 6:2

Prayer for suffering Christians, *from Barnabas Prayer*

Heavenly Father,

We pray for the availability of Your Word throughout the world, especially in the countries whose governments try to suppress it.

We lift before You Bible translators and pray for discernment in their painstaking labours. We ask that people groups without clear translations of the Scriptures in their own languages will soon have access to the Truth. We know that "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God". Please feed Your persecuted people with this spiritual food to strengthen them to endure.

We ask in the Name of the Living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. (Matthew 4:4; John 1:14).

Hymn: by C Wesley

1. O Thou who camest from above the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart!
2. There let it for Thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return in humble prayer and fervent praise.
3. Jesus, confirm my heart's desire to work, and speak, and think for Thee;
still let me guard the holy fire, and still stir up Thy gift in me.
4. Ready for all Thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat;
till death thy endless mercies seal, and make the sacrifice complete.

© public domain

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This service was prepared by Warren Mack for HopeNet SA