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Title: Hard Things Jesus Said

Series: Do Not Worry

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Text: [Matthew 6:25-34](#)

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A few months ago, Pastor Kyle suggested this sermon series on *Hard Things Jesus Said*, and it seemed to fit nicely in these three Sundays leading up to Advent. I appreciate him leading off the series last week with “Love Your Enemies.” These three sermons—“Love Your Enemies,” “Do Not Worry,” and “Do Not Judge”—are hard to hear and even harder to put into practice. These three—and many more—are found in a sermon that Jesus preached called the “Sermon on the Mount.” Most of us remember the Sermon on the Mount because it begins with the “bless-eds” or what we call the “Beatitudes.” You know, “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,” and other things that would have had people’s heads spinning because it was so counter cultural at the time, and, if we are honest, it still is.

Jesus didn’t stop with the “bless-eds.” The sermon continues with “love your enemies” and today’s scripture, “do not worry”—all a part of the same sermon. When you think “don’t worry,” your mind might immediately go to the 1988 Bobby McFerrin smash hit “Don’t Worry-Be Happy.” “Here’s a little song I wrote...” Trust me, that will be running through your head all day.

When you look up the word “worry” in the dictionary, you discover that it means to “give way to anxiety or unease; allow one’s mind to dwell on difficulty or troubles.”¹ When we worry, we are apprehensive over what *might* happen. Corrie ten Boom had a little poem that she used to recite on occasion about worry. She said, “Worry is an old man with bended head, carrying a load of feathers which he thinks are lead.”² She captured the concept of worry beautifully in those few words because worry is about something that isn’t. It’s about something that we fear will be.

The word for worry used in the New Testament comes from the Greek word, which means to have “a divided mind.” Another description that I like is that worry is “a small trickle of fear that meanders

¹ www.dictionary.com

² Corrie ten Boom quote found at <https://quotefancy.com/corrie-ten-boom-quotes>

through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained.”³ In essence, worry itself is concern over the future. The problem is that the future is not here yet. So not only are you loaded with today, you are even more weighed down by tomorrow.

We’ll take a look today at what Jesus says about worry in just a moment, but first let’s look at what is NOT there. When Jesus says, "Don't worry," he's not saying, "Don't plan." Jesus planned. Jesus planned for his ministry after his death and resurrection. Jesus himself would teach in a different part of scripture that we are not to enter into a project without counting the cost and planning into the future, so when we talk about not worrying here and when Jesus says, "Don't worry," he's not saying, "Don't plan."

Secondly, he's not saying, "Don't ever be concerned about things." Philippians 4 says, "Be anxious for nothing," and people want to assume that means, "just walk through life in a carefree, cavalier spirit; don't ever worry about anything. Just be loose and free." That's also NOT what Jesus means. The bottom line is that we are to be concerned about things. If you see your child, or any child for that matter, out in the front yard playing next to where the traffic is, you will be concerned, and your concern will motivate you into action so that you can prevent that child from being hurt. That is a legitimate concern and something over which you have control. We're not talking about that either. There is a difference between worry and concern.

I think the difference is this: Worry usually has to do with the future over which we have no control, and concern usually has to do with the present, and there are often some things that we can do in the present to take care of the problem. So, we're not talking about not planning; we're not talking about not having any concern. We are talking about letting the spirit of worry take over in your life.

With that as a backdrop, we can examine the words of Jesus in our scripture for today. As context, scholars aren't quite sure where this section of teaching begins and ends. Most translations of the Bible, including our pew Bibles, have verse 24 hanging out on its own; that was just before where we started today. It is an entire section of scripture comprised of one verse. That verse says, "No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). The question, then, is whether our section about worry relates directly to wealth and possessions or whether it starts a new thought.⁴

Either way, society has changed a great deal since the time of Jesus. Definitions of poverty, wealth, and the good life are much different today than they were then. We are bombarded with images and messages from advertisers that encourage us to consume. We have constructed a world economy that is dependent upon the consumer to keep it afloat. This is a difficult section because Jesus' words seem out of step with our society. "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31).

On the surface, as Ulrich Luz has put it, this statement could only have been written by a single guy living a carefree life on the beach in sunny Galilee. In a deeper reading, however, Jesus is not calling us all to abandon our lives and move to the desert to join a monastery or to the Galilean beach and empty our savings accounts and 401(k)s. Rather, Jesus is addressing the basis for excessive worry and anxiety that can result from a life separated from God. The text calls us to a different set of values, different priorities.

³ Attributed without footnote to "Our Daily Bread" and found at <https://ezraproject.com/merimnao-the-dilemma-of-anxiety/>

⁴ Commentary on Matthew 6:24-34 by Emerson Powery, February 27, 2011 found at www.workingpreacher.org.

The emphasis of the text is on excessive worrying or anxiety about our needs in life. What we read is balanced in three sections. The first is not to worry about food or drink. Inspiration for it was derived from observing the habits of birds. Birds do not worry, they are cared for by God. The second section is to not worry about what they will wear. I don't think this scripture was referring to me when I attended the Hamilton County Humane Society gala on Thursday and the attire was described as "cocktail attire." I had to Google what that meant for men. I know, I should get out more. Rather than that, this speaks of the basic need of clothing, which for many in the culture of first-century Palestine was a concern. Jesus' response is that the flowers of the field grow and bloom with ease and astonishing beauty.

This section closes with a summary and concluding statement. The life of discipleship is characterized by a life that is singular in its pursuit of God. It does not mean that we will not (or should not) acquire possessions or wealth or that we don't need food, clothing, and other necessities. Rather, once one is devoted to God, one adopts the values, behaviors, and priorities that God affirms. We do not strive or worry endlessly about our needs. Rather, in entrusting our life to God, we look to God.

We live in an anxious age now, to be sure. Every age throughout history has had their own anxieties, their own anxiety-producing problems, but there are a couple of factors that really do make our age particularly prone to anxiety. One of those factors is that we not only deal with our own anxieties, but we also live in a hyperconnected world where we can be connected to everyone else's anxieties. If anyone anywhere in the world is worried about anything, it can be transmitted immediately to us. We're not awash in our own anxieties alone but can carry—literally—the weight of the world.

With much research having been done in the area of anxiety as a proven medical condition, I am well aware that standing here and saying that Jesus says not to worry is not helpful and may even be hurtful. The question of our scripture may be better stated this way: Worry and anxiety is not what Jesus wants for you. What is it for you that can help free you of that worry?

Earlier this week, one of our church members who tutors at a local elementary school stopped in my office to tell me about a book that she had just read to her student. Knowing that this sermon was on worry, she told me about the book called *Ruby Finds a Worry*, so of course, I had to buy it. I don't know whether it's you or me, but I'm finding deep theological insight recently in words written for 5-8-year-olds.

In *Ruby Finds a Worry*, by Tom Percival, the main character is Ruby. Everyone with me so far? Ruby was a happy girl until one day she discovered a small worry. Over time, the worry began to grow. It began to consume Ruby. It was there peeking at her over the cereal box in the morning and when she brushed her teeth at night. No one else could see the worry, but it was always there and eventually it stopped her from doing the things she loved.

The worry got so big that it filled up half of the school bus. It became the only thing that Ruby would think about. But one day, she noticed a boy sitting at the park, looking like she felt—sad. She noticed that next to the boy was—could it be—a worry? She sat down next to him on the park bench and asked him what was on his mind. As he told her, the strangest thing happened. His worry began to shrink.

Ruby started to talk about her worry. If you're following the plot line here, you might guess what began to happen to her worry. Yes! Her worry began to shrink as well. The actual words of the book say this,

“As the words tumbled out, Ruby’s Worry began to shrink until it was barely there at all.”⁵ This can be one lesson, perhaps, in how we manage worry. Talk about it. Seek out a friend. We are blessed here to have Stephen Ministers—a one-on-one listening and caring ear. We can help connect you. It may help as well to figure out if this is a worry—something that might happen over which you have little or no control—or a concern—something that your action might impact. Concentrate on the concerns.

We can turn our anxieties over to God and not try to wrestle them away from God when we need to solve all things. “You can’t add one hour to your life,” Jesus says, by being of two minds. And then Jesus concludes this section with this simple truth: “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things will be given to you as well.” Another Corrie ten Boom quote is, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”⁶

Another strategy for moving worry out of your life should be evident this week. In our striving for the kingdom of God, maybe the best way for us to move worry out—or to shrink it like Ruby did—is to let thankfulness and gratitude in. As you gather with family and friends this year, rather than worry about whether the sweet potatoes and the turkey will be done at the same time or whether your uncle will have an uncomfortable conversation with your cousin, take some time to find the blessings.

There is a poem by Mary Oliver that may help in that focus. I will leave you with it. It is titled “I Worried.”

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught, and if not, how shall I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven, can I do better? Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows can do it and I am, well, hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it, am I going to get rheumatism, lockjaw, dementia?

Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing. And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning...and sang.⁷

Mary Oliver decides to sing. Sing? With my voice? Sing instead of worry? Yes. Even with your voice. That’s a tradeoff I can recommend.

⁵ Percival, Tom. *Ruby Finds a Worry*, published by Bloomsbury Children’s Books, New York, NY, copyright 2018.

⁶ <https://quotefancy.com/corrie-ten-boom-quotes>

⁷ <https://apoemaday.tumblr.com/post/175408809725/i-worried>