

# ***“Stop It!”***

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***Worry is sin, and that's good news.***

***Matthew 6:25-34***

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## ***Dr. Switzer's advice***

When I started pondering Jesus' words in this part of the Sermon on the Mount early this week, they reminded me of a legendary [comedy sketch](#) with Bob Newhart. A woman named Katherine Bigmans comes in to see her therapist, Dr. Switzer (Newhart) and admits she has a fear of being buried alive in a box. He tells her that he charges \$5 for five minutes, and that most sessions don't take that long. Skeptical, she continues.

Dr. Switzer then proceeds to give Katherine his advice: "Stop it!" He adds, "You don't want to go through life being afraid of being buried in a box. That would be frightening. So stop it!" Since that conversation took less than five minutes, she mentions other problems, like bulimia, unhealthy relationships with men, and a fear of driving. Each time he says, "Stop it!" With one exception. She says she compulsively washes her hands. Dr. Switzer says, "That's all right. I do that all the time. Don't worry about that one. There are a lot of germs out there!" For everything else, "Stop it!"

Is that what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6? If you're prone to worry, is Jesus saying, "Stop it!"? "Do not worry! End of conversation. Five bucks, please."

Let's look at his actual words and then we'll come back to the "Stop it!" question. First, a little context. This section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount addresses most directly the subject of money. Pastor Amy began last week with verses 19-24, where Jesus puts our focus on God. He is our "treasure in heaven." You can't be a slave to both God and Money. Now he continues with six reasons not to worry.

## ***Why not worry***

Reason #1: *Life is more than physical.* As Jesus introduces the subject in Matthew 6:25, we realize immediately that the specific area of worry he addresses first is what we might call “the bare necessities” – food, drink, clothing. To be sure, these truly are necessities. Some of it may have to do with his audience vs. us, but don’t think that *everyone* in first century Israel was wondering where their next meal was coming from. You don’t have to have a bare pantry or closet to worry about food and clothing.

“Is not life more than food,” Jesus asks, “and the body more than clothes?” (25) You are not just a body; you are a soul. Your life is more than just physical.

Reason #2: *Your heavenly Father provides.* Jesus continues, “Look at the birds of the air” (26), and a few sentences later, “See how the flowers of the field grow” (28).

What he’s advocating is more than a walk through nature. He’s asking us to look behind creation to its Maker. “Your heavenly Father feeds” the birds (26). “God clothes the grass of the field” (30) even better than “Solomon in all his splendor” (29).

It’s important in this section to keep your focus on God and not press the analogy too far. Of course birds and flowers don’t worry; they don’t have a prefrontal cortex. And although birds don’t “store away in barns,” squirrels do. Birds do work hard; they’re not passive. But flowers “do not labor or spin” (28). You’ll ruin the analogy if you over-analyze it. Jesus’ point is that the same God who provides for them provides for you. That’s why *you* don’t have to worry.

Reason #3: *Worrying doesn’t change anything.* “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (27) Some translations say, “...a single cubit to your height.” It doesn’t matter whether you’re talking about the length of your life or the height of your body. Worry won’t change either one.

Reason #4: *Worry is pagan.* That’s blunt, isn’t it? Once again, he’s talking about food and drink and clothes, and he says, “the pagans run after all these things” (32). This is what makes me realize Jesus is not just speaking to the destitute. He’s not looking at the homeless woman in her tent or the bulging belly of a famine-stricken boy and saying, “You are worrying. Stop it!” Nor is he giving us an excuse not to care of the needs of the poor. Followers of any god, of every god, including the one true God, desire and need something to eat and drink and wear.

But if you’re *running after* all these things – eagerly pursuing the next level of accumulation because you think then you will be content – you’re worried about them not as necessities but as status symbols. A square meal is not enough; you must have gourmet. You used to wear WalMart, then it had to be Stein Mart, then only Dillards, then Marc Jacobs, now only Dior or Gucci. Worry about climbing that ladder is what those do who do not have greater purpose.

Reason #5: *Your Father knows*. Closely connected with reason #4, Jesus returns to the God-focus from earlier. When I allow discontent with my lot in life to rule, when I'm always thinking "I could be happy if only..." the root issue is inadequate theology. I don't trust God. He either doesn't know or doesn't care. Since he's not doing anything to change my situation, I guess it's all up to me. But I've tried and nothing happened! So I worry – worry that I can't change things because obviously God won't.

How many of our prayers seem silly to God because they sound like we're providing him with facts! "Lord, Joe's battling cancer." What do we expect in response from the Lord? "Oh no! I had no clue." Or, "Father, I hate to bother you but wanted to let you know that George is over there on the mission field and needs your help." "So glad you told me. The angel Gabriel hasn't gotten here yet with my daily briefing."

Fortunately, God doesn't treat our prayers as silly. What grace that the Holy Spirit reframes our prayers in keeping with the Father's will (Romans 8:26)! He also knows it's healthy for us to name our needs. We just need to remember he's not sitting up there thinking, "If Pastor Bob would only inform me what's he worried about, then I'd be able to figure out what to do." He knows.

Reason #6: *Tomorrow's not here yet*. Worry, by definition, is about the future. Jesus closes this section by putting that into perspective. I found a great quote in an [article on the Huffington Post](#), which is not where I usually turn for great quotes. This one was from someone named Michel de Montaigne, who said five hundred years ago, "My life has been filled with terrible misfortune, most of which never happened." The article goes on to cite a 2015 research project that concluded 85% of what we worry about doesn't happen, and, of the things that do happen, 80% of the time we conclude that we're better off because it did.

Jesus said the same thing 2000 years before the Huffington Post, and 1500 years before de Montaigne. I see a twinkle in his eye as he concludes the topic of worry by saying, "Each day has enough trouble of its own" (34). Focus your mental and physical energies on this moment. You don't receive grace or strength for the future in advance. When you get there, whatever "there" looks like, your heavenly Father already knows what you will need at that moment. He won't desert you. What's the next step? Do that.

So what are the next steps? What does Jesus' teaching on worry tell us to do?

### ***Confess it***

First, confess it. Name your worry. Jesus presumes in this passage you already know the lesson of the Psalms, which is that God not only can handle – he invites – brutal honesty about your worries. But there's more to the word "confess."

Worry is sin. That's good news. You may think you did not hear that right, so I'll say it again: Worry is sin, and that's good news. That raises the question, Why?

In today's culture, your friend is not likely to say that to you. Neither is your therapist, at least not at first. But in my role today I'm not your friend and I'm not your therapist. I'm your pastor, a preacher of the Word of God. And try as I did to reframe what Jesus is saying in this passage, I couldn't avoid the conclusion that worry is sin. R. H. Mounce says it this way: "Worry is practical atheism and an affront to God."

Even we preachers don't use the "s" word as much as we used to, probably as an overreaction to the way preachers used it in days past – as a guilt-hammer designed to put you in a different category, one unworthy of association with the rest of us good people. To call worry "sin" is not designed to shame you if you're a worrier.

There may be two reasons you worry more than most – one internal and the other external. By *external* I mean that you really might be dealing with more difficult circumstances than most other people you know. Life is tough right now and the natural trajectory is that it will probably get tougher. By *internal* I mean that some people are predisposed to worry either by heredity or environment. That is to say, you were either "born to worry" or you followed the example of mom or dad or someone else who shaped you and now you tend to see the negative more than the positive.

It's still sin; it's still unbelief. Just because you're predisposed to worry you don't get a pass from admitting this worry is a barrier between you and God, between you and others, or both. That's what sin is. Jesus is doing with worry the same thing he did with greed in the previous passage, the same thing he did with giving, prayer, and fasting in the section before that, the same thing he did with topics like lust and anger in chapter 5.

The whole Sermon on the Mount seems designed to expand the definition of sin, while we often try to contract it. Why? Because when I really understand the nature of sin, I stop thinking of myself as better than other sinners. By uncovering every rock under which I might hide, Jesus levels the playing field. If you worry, welcome to the community of the rest of us who fall short. When you admit the sin, you're so much more comfortable around other sinners. You're at home. That's good news.

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller writes, "To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us."

The other reason this is good news is that confessing sin is the best thing that can happen to us. We worry about being exposed, but exposure is where we find healing. If you've been reading our 150 Days of Prayer devotional guide, you read Judy Stewart's recent devotion about Psalm 32, where King David shares "the incredible blessing of being forgiven." As Judy says, David "reveals that the choice to live in denial, deceit, and silence about his transgression was literally killing him."

If you are trying to excuse your worry as justifiable because of what's happened to you or allowable because that's just who you are, *stop it!* Confess it for what it is, and you'll be amazed at how much freedom there is in naming before God – and in the right context before others – that worry is a sin. When you get there, you have a whole new reason to bask in the grace of God that because Jesus died for your sins you are forgiven, loved, restored, and declared perfect by God the Father. That's good news!

### ***Replace it***

More than once in this passage, Jesus redirects the attention of the worrier. He doesn't just say, "Stop it!" He says, "Replace it!"

*Notice* the birds of the air. *Ponder* the lilies of the field. Allow them to take you to even deeper reflection on your heavenly Father. Jesus teaches here what Richard Rohr calls "wandering in nature." I'm not as good at this discipline as some of you, but Rohr says if you'll deliberately place yourself "where human impact is minimal," you'll be able to discover God's presence.

Later in the passage he says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." The "kingdom of God" is simply where God is in charge. The focus Jesus wants is releasing control to him and choosing behaviors that please him.

Jesus adds, "and all these things will be given to you as well." He's not saying that you won't have any troubles; he specifically says you will. He's not promoting a direct cause and effect, a guarantee that if you seek God's kingdom you'll never have problems. He's just saying that he will be enough for you when you focus on him.

In *The Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson says, "We are what we pay attention to." If you have become passive about what you let into your mind, or, worse yet, have chosen to pay attention to what you know will worry you, *stop it!* There's a wide gap between the struggle against involuntary worry and the choice to allow our eyes and ears to open the floodgate of all the worst inputs.

Pay attention to what you pay attention to that is feeding your worry. You may feel like you don't have control over your feelings when you're exposed to some stimulus, but you probably have more control than you realize over the stimuli. The Apostle Paul, in addressing worry, says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.... And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9).

Paul also says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Prayer and thanks are ways of paying attention to God. Meditate on Scripture. Psalm 23 is one well-known example, but you can find so many psalms and other texts to ponder

when worry's getting the upper hand. For the next four months, you have our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary guide with one psalm a day. If you're not currently receiving those daily emails for your encouragement and blessing, notify [office@corinthtoday.org](mailto:office@corinthtoday.org).

### ***Pursue it***

This passage focuses on the need for ongoing choices. "Replace it" is not a one and done solution. If you've been pursuing things that will never satisfy, *stop it!* Instead, pursue your worry. I'm using the word "pursue" in the sense of hunting it, chasing it, dogging it, staying with the quest.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, a prohibition like "Do not worry" can either mean "Don't keep worrying" or "Stop worrying." So which did Jesus say? Both. In verse 25, "Don't keep worrying," and in verses 31 and 34, "Stop worrying."<sup>1</sup> In other words, whether your worry is constant, occasional, or getting ready to start up, deal with it.

As I said, I don't think Jesus is suggesting everyone is equally capable of flipping a switch. I do think he is saying about this sin as he would say about any other, don't give up. Don't ever let up on the hunt – any more than you would any other sin or addiction.

For some of you, that means reaching out for some help. We have a new anxiety support group here that can help. We can refer you to trained Christian counselors who will walk you through this compassionately but firmly.

Perhaps most importantly, in those times when you see some progress in your worry battle, claim the phrase, "I'm a recovering worrier." If you're prone to anxiety or its offspring, depression, you will most likely have times when you're doing better. Those are the moments to use the energy and progress to set in motion some new action steps and even new relationships that will help you sustain it.

Remember again the good news as we close. Jesus came into our world so he could experience personally and directly every area of human struggle. See him in the Garden of Gethsemane saying, "Father, if there is any other way, let this cup pass from me." I wouldn't call what he expressed there "worry," because worry is sin and he didn't sin. But in that moment – and in so many others during his life on earth, he entered in to our battle against sin. You can talk to him about this one, too. Not only does he understand worry, he died and rose again so that when you put your trust in him you never have to bear the weight of guilt and shame even when you have given in. He declares you an overcomer, and he will get you there. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Verse 25 uses the Present Active Imperative, and verses 31 7 34 the Aorist Active Subjunctive. [Click here](#) and see the section on "negative commands."