

Luke 12: 22-31

Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 14: 13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sickness. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Worry.

In spite of the fact that Jesus clearly told us not to, we all do it.

Can we worry and still be Christians? Is there some sort of sliding scale of Christianity we fit into based on the amount of worry we let into our lives?

Is this something we should be worried about?

The admonition Christ gave us to not worry wasn't given in isolation; it appears in Luke's gospel directly after the story of the parable of the rich fool. In that parable, a rich man's harvest was so abundant he had no place to store it all, so he planned to tear down his barns and build ones large enough to hold everything. After doing that he would have enough riches stored for him to relax for years. But God took him that same evening, and all the riches he had stored up in this life, and all the plans he had to acquire even more, did him no good.

The point Jesus was trying to make was that if you work to fulfill God's will for his people, the other things – things of *this* world, like what we'll eat and where we'll live – will take care of themselves. "Strive for his kingdom," Jesus said, "and these things will be given to you as well."



I've always tried to live my life that way, and I married and have spent the last 34 years of my life with a world-class worrier. My wife, Nella, could win a medal tomorrow if worrying was an Olympic sport. If you ask her about it, she'll tell you that's because she pays the bills, or she'll say that she worries because "somebody has to," and her husband is really not a very good worrier at all.

Back in the late 80s, my wife and I were strapped for cash. We had just bought our first home, we had one child, our son Chris, and we shared an old Honda Civic that had well over 100,000 miles on it. One morning, as we left the house to begin our drive to school and work, my wife was crying because we had \$250 in bills to pay by the next day, and no money to pay them.

I told her not to worry about it, and that God would work it all out for us. That God always did. However, because she didn't see how it could possibly work out, Nella continued to be preoccupied with the fact that we wouldn't be able to pay those bills. That's how professional worriers are.

That evening, after picking up Chris at school and Nella at work, we were driving home past West Farms Mall. I was in the right lane, and a car swerved from the center lane and turned aggressively into the mall parking lot. Unfortunately, in the process of doing so, this car clipped our little Honda, and put a small dent in the rear fender. As I pulled over behind him, the driver of the other car got out and walked back to my car.

"You hit my car," I said.

The first thing he said was, "We don't need to call the police. It is just a minor dent."

I said, “No. It’s not minor. And we need to report this.” He pointed out that my car had other dents, implying that maybe this new one was not really a big deal. Again he told me that we didn’t need to call the police.

When I told him I would need a police report to send to the insurance company so I could get the dent fixed, he pulled out his wallet and offered to pay for the damage. After a minute or two we had agreed on a figure that would allow me to get what I needed and not involve the police.

I walked back to our car, sat next to my wife, and dropped eight fifty-dollar bills onto her lap. I said, “There’s \$250 for the bills we have to pay tomorrow, and another \$150 for groceries. God took care of it for us.”

It’s a silly story, but like most silly stories there’s an important bit of truth in it: oftentimes we worry too much about things we can’t control, and Jesus was very clear about his desire for us not to spend our time doing that.



It seems like worry has become America’s favorite pastime, and we don’t just worry about how we’re going to pay our bills. Today we worry about losing our jobs...and the violence – particularly gun violence – that seems to be everywhere ...and terrorism...and how we’re going to protect ourselves and our families from all the bad things that might happen to us.

We worry because we’re afraid, and fear is the greatest motivator in the world. Always has been. Probably always will be.

If you want someone to do something, scaring them is simply the best way to make sure it’s going to get done. More than money, more than food, and even more than sex, fear is the most effective motivational tool there is. Want your child to do well in school? Don’t tell her how important her education is and how much better off she’ll be in the long run if she does. Tell her about all the horrible things her life will become if she doesn’t do well. Or, since it’s hard for kids to connect their actions today with gratification delayed, create a consequence she’ll be afraid of if she comes home with a bad report card, and chances are she *will* do well in school.

Believe me when I tell you that during my 25 years in advertising it became clear that the best way to motivate any audience was to scare them by pointing out the bad things that would happen to them if they didn’t buy my clients’ products.

You can also believe me when I tell you that fear and worry have become the primary way many of us relate to our world. Advertisers admonish us to, “Buy now because supplies are limited,” and we do. We get our news from programs that offer the “early warnings” and the “news you need to keep you safe” and the “consumer advocates that will fight for you” when the big, bad world tries to cheat us out of what is rightfully ours.

Is it any wonder that we worry?



It's important to understand that this propensity for worry isn't new. In fact, in the story I read from Matthew shows that even the men Jesus had chosen to be his disciples worried unnecessarily.

As it says in verse 15: *When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

The point of the lesson I read is clearly the miracle that was performed by feeding so many with so little. I'm sure that is why a version of it was included in all four gospels. But I like to imagine what it must have been like to be there as the crowd grew larger and larger, and the disciples began to realize it was getting late, and they were getting hungry themselves, and there weren't any stores open, and all these people were going to want to be fed. Can you imagine the conversations they had amongst themselves before they approached Jesus with their concerns?

"There are too many people. We can't feed all of them. What are we going to do?"

"We can't possibly feed this many people. They have to leave. Tell them to leave."

"I'm not telling them to leave. *You* tell them to leave!"

"Are you crazy? I'm not telling them to leave. Let's get Jesus to get rid of them!"

Rather than being thrilled that so many people were flocking to Jesus to be healed and to hear his teaching, all they could think about was how they were going to get stuck feeding so many people. Talk about not striving for the kingdom of God!

Jesus knew the problem wasn't a lack of food. He knew the *real* problem was the way his disciples were reacting to the growing crowd – which they perceived as a threat – and the fact that they were blind to the miracle God was unfolding before them.

Like the disciples, as Christians we are called to action, and like them we are sometimes too blinded by fear and worry to see how we are called to react. But how can we do what Jesus tells us to do – to not worry – when our world is so messed up? Can we be Christians and still worry?



George Gerbner, a communications scholar from the University of Pennsylvania, dedicated his life to studying the effect of media communications on culture, and he developed an interesting explanation for how profoundly we have been negatively impacted by what we've seen in the media, particularly on television.

When I was a kid, there was a big push to eliminate violence on television and in the movies, because many believed that watching violent acts made us more violent. What Gerbner found, however, was not that watching violence makes us more violent, but that watching violence *makes us more scared of violence being done to us*. The opinions, images, and attitudes we form when watching television has a direct influence on how we perceive the real world we live in. In other words, we figure that if there's as much violence in the world as we're being shown, we *must* be at risk.

Gerbner came up with the term *Mean World Syndrome* to describe the phenomenon whereby violence-related content of mass media *makes viewers believe the world is more dangerous than it actually is*. Today, for instance, Justice Department figures show that violent crime is at a 30-year low, yet polls consistently show that most Americans believe just the opposite to be true. It's interesting to note that over two-thirds of Americans who say crime is a serious or very serious problem report that they get most of their news from television. There is a direct correlation between the amount of television one watches and the level of fear one has of being victimized.

What's really scary about the Mean World Syndrome is how it affects our ability to have relationships with other people – especially people who may not be like us. Gerbner found that there's a link between the way different groups are portrayed in the media, and the way we feel about people who are from those groups. Blacks and Latinos, for example, were often portrayed as violent, so people often assumed that all blacks and Latinos were violent.

Repeated exposure to these images of a mean world have contributed to the sense of anxiety and fear that is overwhelming our ability to think clearly and rationally. Rather than being able to discern any real level of threat we may be facing, we hear over and over that the terrorists are Muslims, and the illegal immigrants are murderers and rapists, and in our haze of fear we're left worrying that we're in danger from all Muslims and all illegal immigrants, and everyone else who's not like us, and we have to protect our children, our families, and people who *are* like us, from those that are *not* like us.

One of the more profound things Gerbner said is, "Those who tell the stories of a culture govern human behavior in that culture. It used to be the parent, the school, the church, the community." that told those stories. "Now it's a handful of global conglomerates," – the media – "that have nothing to tell, but a great deal to sell."

He's right, and that's a very scary thought. The only obligation those who control our cultural stories today have is to make a profit, or to endorse a political agenda, which is usually driven by its own profit motive. Today's talking heads don't have to be right, and they aren't held accountable for the inaccuracies they repeat over and over again. They say what they have to say in order to induce fear in us, and then they walk away and let that fear grow into worry that overtakes our lives.

We need to understand that people are using fear to motivate us to do what they want us to do, and what they want us to do has no benefit for us. There is not a morsel of moral motivation behind their actions. Our preoccupation with that kind of fear paralyzes us, and keeps us from being fully capable of loving one another.



We can change this. As Christians, I believe we have a moral obligation to work to change this. I believe this is exactly what Jesus was talking about when he implored us to strive for God's kingdom, and I believe our still-speaking God is calling us to open our eyes and begin to think for ourselves

We live in a pretty amazing world that is filled with wonder and beauty, and it's time for us to

acknowledge that and focus on the good that exists in all of us.

We can begin that process today by taking six concrete steps away from the unreality of our mean world.

- 1) Stop worrying about things we have absolutely no control over. And realize that any semblance of control we think we might have over anything in this world is nothing but an illusion.
- 2) Start reacting to the reality we live in, rather than the reality others want us to *believe* we live in. They don't care about us, and they're using us to get what they want for themselves. We alone can stop them from doing that.
- 3) Turn off the television. At least the news. And political talk shows. And reality TV shows that denigrate others so we can revel in their misery. I saw a Facebook page the other day that said, "There is no medicine on the television; so turn it off and turn yourself around." We would do well to heed that advice.
- 4) Speaking of Facebook, Jesus wants me to let you know that he's going to be checking everybody's Facebook pages on Monday, so you may want to clean up your posts. Seriously, are we using social media to spread love and good news, or are we using it to spread unhappiness, fear, and hatred – or, perhaps worse of all, are we being *used by others*, manipulated into posting *their* messages of negativity?
- 5) Lighten someone else's load. Do something – do *anything* – to make someone else happy today. It doesn't have to be an earth-shattering act of kindness. Every small act undertaken in love helps us to tip the balance of the world back to where it should be.

And finally...

- 6) Take Jesus with us when we leave here today, and keep him with us 24/7 until we return next week. Let everything we do, everything we say, and even everything we *think* be put through the filter of how Jesus would react if he was with us when we did, said, or thought it.

Can we really call ourselves Christians if we can't subject everything we do, say, and think to the scrutiny of a Christ that implored us to not worry about things of this world, but rather to strive for God's kingdom? Aren't we fooling ourselves when we say we are Christians but close our hearts to those who are in need?

My prayer today is that we might all dedicate ourselves to helping our brothers and sisters – everyone, everywhere – move beyond the unreality of our *mean world*, so that we might make living in the great grace and love of our creator our new reality.

Do not worry.

Continue to strive for God's kingdom.

Amen.