

Anxiety! Stress! Worry! Decision Making!

Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:4-9

A young lady confidently walked around the room while leading and explaining stress management to an audience with a raised glass of water. Everyone knew she was going to ask the ultimate question, 'half empty or half full?'

She fooled them all. "How heavy is this glass of water?" she inquired with a smile. Answers called out ranged from 8 oz. to 20 oz.

She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, you'll have to call an ambulance. In each case it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes." She continued, "and that's the way it is with stress.

"If we carry our burdens, anxiety, worries and stress all the time, sooner or later, as they become increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on." As with the glass of water, we have to put it down for a while and rest before holding it again. When we're refreshed, we can carry on with the burden - holding stress longer and better each time we carry it." Usually!

And the longer we ponder and stew and look at decision making alternatives, and try to nail down all the "what if's," we will drive ourselves crazy. It's normal but not helpful to over think, over analyze, and want to make sure we absolutely have all the decision making possibilities covered. This then becomes another set of worries, since we can't fully know our futures, much less control all the possibilities. So we then stress out about our anxiety. And we have decision making paralysis.

Charlie Brown to Linus: "I worry about school a lot. He thought a little longer and then said, "I worry about worrying so much about school." He reflected some more and then concluded, "Even my anxieties have anxieties!" So worry is

wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles.

It's like the weary Christian who was awake all night trying to hold the world together by his anxiety filled prayers. Then he heard the Lord gently say to him, "You can go to sleep now, I'll sit up for you." So, as early in the evening as we can, let's put all our burdens down. Don't carry them through the evening and into the night. Pick them up tomorrow – but only if you have to.

Our Creator knows us really really really well! The **Bible** is full of verses about anxiety, stress, worry and the decision making that often goes with it. For example: Proverbs says, (12:25) "An anxious heart weighs a person down, but a kind word cheers them up." The psalmist tells us, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (42:5)

Bible stories tell us about people's worries. For example we know the irony of Joseph's brothers needing to, deciding to go to Egypt, to beg the brother they sold into slavery, for food in the middle of a famine. Not having food is a life size worry. Going as a foreigner into another country is always stressful. Then Joseph recognizes them, and toys with them – which adds anxiety.

Also, many people, including Christians recognize the propensity we have to stress, and have **written** about it - a lot! For example: Corrie ten Boom writes: "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength." "Worry is a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around a center of fear."

"If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. But if you look at Christ, you'll be at rest." "It is not my ability, but my response to God's ability that counts."

"Now, I know in my experience that Jesus' light is stronger than the biggest darkness."

So God knows our human condition well, and encourages us to find ways to not worry. And followers of Jesus have used up many trees and filled the air with lots of reasons to not let anxiety take over our lives. We know life situations can snow ball as we get uptight about decisions and situations and people. So it's normal for people to write **songs** about it and prescribe a remedy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDlNpuCiinE>
Don't Worry, Be Happy!

We all know the message of this popular song is easier said than done. We worry about making the wrong decisions. We fear that our loved ones are making bad choices. Health concerns for our selves and for loved ones can overwhelm us. The reasons for anxiety are many. And sometimes we have genetic patterns. Plus I believe a preoccupation with anxiety can change our biology to have an increased propensity to worry. And surveys show that the world is more stressed than it's been for a while as more and more people live in uncertainty.

It's ironic that in Canada, with as good as it is for us, we rank fourth in the world in taking antidepressants, from age 12 and up. Antidepressant use is not an accurate window into rates of depression because in a given country it's the result of a complicated mix of depression rates, stigma, wealth, health coverage, culture, and availability of a variety of treatments. But still, human kind has a problem.

Especially since we know that 40% of what we worry about never happens. 30% of our anxiousness is about the past. 12% are needless worries about our health. 10% are about petty issues. And only 8% of our stress are legitimate concerns. That means that 92% of our "worry time" is wasted energy as we exert mental and emotional energy on things outside our control. One person wrote: "Don't tell me that worrying doesn't help; the things I worry about never happen!"

I think God encourages us to not even over stress about the 8%. If our concern about the past means we need to ask forgiveness – just do it! And I think God is telling us that worry is a way of saying we don't trust Him to take care of us. That our problems are bigger than His promises.

These passages from Matthew 6 and Philippians 4 are often used when we look at the Bible about anxiety. So let's look at them. We find some pretty strong words in this familiar scripture from Matthew. The words are easy to understand but difficult to implement and apply. The word "worry" is used six times in this text. It comes from an Old English word that means "to strangle, to choke, or to seize by the throat."

Another sense of the word worry comes from the Greek definition that refers to being drawn, pulled in different directions, as to be distracted – like with decisions. Worry will pull us apart. It can lead to mental and emotional strangulation. This sense of the word worry was used to refer to how wolves kill sheep by biting them around the neck, strangling their prey to death.

And Jesus here tells us three times to "not worry." These are commands, orders, not nice-sounding suggestions. This provides a helpful corrective to what might be the number one sin of Christians today – anxious worry. Someone has said that there are more people addicted to anxiety than to all the other addictions combined.

Jesus tells us in Matthew, four ways that worry damages us. **First, Worry is a waste of time and energy.** "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...Is not life more important than food, & the body more important than clothes?" Who we are is more important than what we wear or what we eat or what we drink.

Then, Jesus points us to God's creation. "The birds aren't farmers. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

Said the robin to the sparrow, "I would really like to know why these anxious human beings

rush about and hurry so.” Said the sparrow to the robin, “I think that it must be, that they have no Heavenly Father, such as cares for you and me.”

If God feeds the birds who are not farmers, He will certainly take care of us, right? But often our problem is we take our selves too seriously and deep inside we question whether we are worth anything to God.

Second worry doesn't work. Jesus asks us, “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” Worry can actually give us a lot of things, like an ulcer or a migraine but it can't give us a longer life. We can literally worry ourselves to death but we can't worry ourselves to a longer life. So let's do as the psalmist instructs. (42:5) “Why are you down cast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Then Jesus tells us, **Worry causes us to waver in our faith** (28-31). And he points to worrying about clothes. Then he tells us to look at the lilies of the field. Then Jesus reminds us of King Solomon in all His splendor who was not dressed as well as one flower. Then his logic goes to: “If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which doesn't last, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

Jesus tells us our fears have to do with our lack of faith. The word “more” here means, God will do even more for us than he does for the birds, the flowers and the grass. Jesus doesn't want us to be saturated with stress. Anxiety distracts us from faith in Jesus. The way to deal with anxiety is by battling unbelief. John Piper argues that the most basic battle of our life is the battle to believe the living God, because the root of anxiety is unbelief.

And fourth, Worry wipes out our witness (31-32). Jesus reminds us to not be like the pagans. We hear the command again to not have anxiety. We are told not to run after the pleasures and things of this world. Why? Because those things

don't satisfy – so why run after them? Instead we are to crave and diligently seek satisfaction in things that will last. That will fill us. God knows what we need. So seek first his kingdom and righteousness. I think it's safe to say: Worry is the ultimate act of rebellion against God because when we worry we're really saying that God is dead; and if He's alive, then He's not able to do anything about our situations. When we worry we are assuming responsibility for things God never intended us to have. Brian Bill says it like this: Anxiety is atheism in action.

I suspect nothing I've shared today is new. You could share how worry hasn't helped you. We know there are no magic fixes to the stresses we have in life. Sometimes we feel we don't have any option but to feel anxious. But we do know, the key is to put our faith in our heavenly father.

This scripture emphatically tells us: Our Father in Heaven knows us and what we need. So we take comfort in this fact and we need to trust our Creator. The Bible consistently urges us to follow the teaching of 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

We've looked at four reasons anxiety is dangerous for us. We don't have time to look in detail at all the **ways to fight our stress** and decision making dilemma's. There are a lot of ideas and you may have discovered what works for you.

But here are a few in brief. First, when you find yourself worrying or under stress, or caught in a decision making pickle – **worship**. This doesn't take care of the actual problem, but it does calm me down, give me perspective, and refocuses me. For me, this is the number one way to fight with anxiety and difficult decisions. Something happens when I carve out the time to do more than my regular worship, devotional routines. I always turn on some music and listen, sing and just be. I don't know what happens in me, but I do know I get spiritually fed, find faith again, and relax. The problems don't go away, but I find strength. There is something that occurs in worship that must not be underestimated – so find what works for you.

And you know all the Christian help for stress. Many involve other different parts of worship like Prayer. Meditate on Bible passages. Take in a seminar. Go on a silent directed retreat. Do your regular devotions but also change it up. Find a verse to memorize like Psalm 55:22, so you can pull it out when you find yourself worrying. “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.” And don’t forget to come to church events. Attack worry.

Confession is often an unappreciated way to relieve worry. If you are uptight about something in your past, and worry that it might come back to haunt you, like we hear often in the news these days, **confess it to God. Ask for forgiveness.**

And maybe you should **ask the person you hurt, for forgiveness.** Within the last month, I had an interesting surprise encounter. Someone from my school, four years ahead of me, got ahold of my email address and asked for forgiveness. I remember the person well because we were involved in a number of things together back then – despite our age difference.

But we were not friends. This guy contacted me to confess what he had done, and ask forgiveness for bullying me. He was and still is 8 to 12 inches taller than me. He confessed that guys his age would grab younger smaller kids and rub our bellies until they were pink. For them to stop, we had to cry “Uncle.”

I refused to cry “uncle.” This guy wrote about that – which is one reason he remembered me.

Also, he shared that his older brother saw what he did to me, & with his friends on the school play ground, grabbed him, took him to a sand pit, and rubbed his face in the sand. I didn’t know any of this!

His email told me, that after all these years, God told him to ask me for forgiveness, for doing this to me. To relieve the anxiety of this long ago

event, to clear the slate, and be right with his Creator and me, he reached out and connected with me about this. I don’t remember this event at all – and don’t know why. I emailed him that and also told him he was forgiven. We’ve had an exchange of information since then, catching up as to who we are today and sharing some memories.

To relieve worry, one - confess to God, second - confess to the person you hurt, and third - **confess worry as a sin.** Don’t make excuses. Worry is a sin because it displaces God in our life and when you and I worry, we’re living as though God does not exist. Worry also distracts us from full-fledged devotion to Christ and we end up being strangled. It’s time to call it what it is and confess it as sin. Maybe we worry about the past because of guilt.

In the Matthew scripture, we have at least these four points about why worry is bad for us. And Jesus gives us at least 2 ways to conquer anxiety. They would come under the heading, like the things previously mentioned, when we fret with anxiety, we are to focus on the Almighty.

We are to, **Put God first.** Verse 33 begins with the word “But” to show the contrast between how most people live and how the Christ-follower must live: “But seek first His kingdom & His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.” To seek means to have an intense, single-minded focus, to go after; to strive; to pursue. It’s in the present imperative which means that the antidote to anxiety is to make a daily choice to prioritize God’s kingdom. We need to stop making material things central, as well as our own selves, and instead make the kingdom our priority. The word “first” means one’s first and ever dominant concern. God wants to be first place in our lives.” So to win against worry, make God not just prominent in our lives, he must be preeminent.

Jesus also tells us in Matthew, **Place your future in God’s hands.** I imagine Jesus saying verse 34 with a smile on His face: “Therefore do not

worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” We only cook up trouble when we stew about tomorrow. We are not to reach into tomorrow and bring its troubles into today. Don’t borrow trouble. Let’s not get so caught up in what might not even happen in the future that we don’t deal with what is happening in the present. When we agonize with anxiety, let’s focus on the Almighty.

We know all this stuff. And our fears are often real. I hope you are not getting the sense that I’m dismissing our anxieties. Talking with a counselor or good friend is helpful. Taking medication is also helpful and sometimes we needful. And often we simply have to make the best decision we can, with the information we have. But let’s take these words from Jesus seriously and act on them.

Also, these verses from Philippians are important. They give us some more ways to work against stress. They tell us to alter our focus in several ways to find peace. The Apostle Paul was giving a final exhortation to people facing hardship and persecution. So what does he instruct them?

“**Rejoice** in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all.

“The Lord is near. **Do not** be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

“And the **peace** of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, what ever is right, what ever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praise worthy - **think about such things.**

“What ever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into

practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

What a wonderful promise! Doing these things we help us change our perspective!