

Chapter 21: Do Not Be Anxious

Matthew 6:25–34

In the previous section, Jesus warned us not to treasure earthly treasures, and urged us to treasure heavenly treasures (Matt. 6:19–20). The pursuit of earthly wealth, privileges, power, and status is certainly one kind of temptation we face, it is not the only kind. Much more simply, our concerns are often very basic: the food we eat, the clothing we wear, etc. Even if we live in an affluent place like the United States of America, these basic needs come into sharp focus whenever our health declines to one degree or another. In a world where everyone must ultimately die, how should we deal with the anxieties of life? In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus gives a simple answer: *to pacify earthly anxieties, pursue heavenly treasures.*

Pacify Earthly Anxieties (Matt. 6:25–30)

Jesus explicitly ties his warnings against seeking earthly treasures to what he now intends to teach about anxiousness: “*Therefore I tell you...*” (v. 25a). Observing this connection, William Hendriksen explains, “On the basis of what has gone before and in connection with what follows, the meaning is probably this: Since transitory earthly treasures do not satisfy...do not continue to set your heart on the latter, that is, on earthly things, such as food and drink, to keep alive, or on clothes, to keep dressed.”¹ Leon Morris adds, “because it is impossible to be slave to both God and mammon, we should not act as though possessions were the be-all and the end-all of life.”² Why does Jesus need to warn us about being anxious? John Calvin offers two insightful reasons: “either because in so doing men tease and vex themselves to no purpose, by carrying their anxiety farther than is proper or than their calling demands; or because they claim more for themselves than they have a right to do, and place such a reliance on their own industry, that they neglect to call upon God.”³ To these misconceptions, Jesus is clear that our “life” (lit., “soul”; ψυχή; *psuyhē*) is more than food, and our “body” is more than clothing (v. 25).

Jesus moves to bolster his point by a form of argument that brings out “how much more” God cares for his children than either the birds of the air or the lilies of the field.⁴ Jesus begins with the birds: “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (v. 26). To understand Jesus’ words rightly, we must clear away a few misinterpretations. First, Jesus is not calling us to laziness:

¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 349.

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 157.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:339.

⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 214.

“birds do not simply wait for God to drop food into their beaks.”⁵ Birds are, in fact, quite industrious. Second, Jesus is not making a callous promise that true believers will never lack food. Jesus’ point is simpler than that: “Such philosophical and apologetic problems are simply not raised here. The focus is on the disciples’ trust in a heavenly Father, whose concerns and ability to meet their needs are taken for granted.”⁶ God does not always meet every physical need that we have. Nevertheless, God is the *only* one who provides for our physical needs, and he genuinely cares for us.

So, as D. A. Carson puts it, we (like birds) “need not fret.”⁷ Moreover, “fretting” only makes things worse: “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” (v. 27). Worrying about the basic needs of our existence does not add life; rather, such concerns drain away our lives from us. Even more, such anxiety springs from thinking that we have more control over our lives than we really do: “These words show plainly, that Christ reproves not only distrust, but pride, because men ascribe much more than they ought to their own skill.”⁸ While there is certainly a connection between work and reward (as with the birds), the connection is not absolute. Regardless of how hard we work, we will never provide for even our most basic necessities unless God himself provides for us.

The same is true not only for food, but also for clothing: “And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?” (vv. 28–30). The word for “consider” (καταμανθάνω; *katamanthanō*) is related to the word for “disciple” (verb: μανθάνω; *manthanō*, “to learn”; noun: μαθητής; *mathētēs*, “learner/disciple”). Jesus does not ask us to give a casual thought to the lilies of the field, but to *study* them. R. C. H. Lenski thus translates this as “learn well or thoroughly.”⁹ Specifically, Jesus asks us to consider the splendor of the lilies. Lenski’s paraphrase of Jesus’ point is apt: “If God enrobes the lowly and ephemeral lilies so *gorgeously*, he surely will give *common* garments to his far higher creatures.”¹⁰

Pursue Heavenly Treasures (Matt. 6:31–33)

In the first section of this passage, Jesus largely gives us negative instructions: *Do not* be anxious. In this second section, Jesus extends those negative instructions into positive instruction for how to live. To begin, Jesus summarizes the negative teaching of the previous section: “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” (v. 31). While Jesus uses a different word for “therefore” here (οὖν; *oun*) than he did earlier in v. 25), the meaning is largely the same. Jesus is summarizing and applying the point that he has just finished making.

⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 215.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 266.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 215.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:342.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 282.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 283.

Then, Jesus offers two explanatory phrases in v. 32, each marked by the word γάρ (*gar*; “for”):¹¹ “For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and [lit., “for”] your heavenly Father knows that you need them all” (v. 32). In the first phrase, Jesus makes his point of comparison explicit. If we are feel anxiety about meeting our basic needs, then we behave like the Gentiles—that is, we think of God from a pagan perspective, for whom the gods would be fickle and unfaithful. The second phrase, then, gives the contrast perspective: “for your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” Our Father in heaven knows precisely what we need, and he cares for us. In v. 32, then, Jesus is trying to shift our thinking—not only to recognize that we are wrong, but to remember what is right about God’s fatherly compassion for us.

Finally, Jesus tells us what we should do instead: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (v. 33). On the command, Carson writes that, “To seek first the kingdom (“of God” in some MSS) is to desire above all to enter into, submit to, and participate in spreading the news of the saving reign of God, the messianic kingdom already inaugurated by Jesus, and to live so as to store up treasures in heaven in the prospect of the king’s consummation.”¹² As Calvin observes, “Nothing is better adapted to restrain the wantonness of the flesh from breaking out in the course of the present life, than meditation on the life of the heavens.”¹³

In this, Jesus connects back to the point he made earlier in the previous passage: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). Yet, this does not leave alone the command to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; rather, Jesus ties this command to a promise: “and all these things will be added to you.” We do not meet our physical needs by anxiously toiling, but by looking to God in faith to feed us. This is something that even the animals do instinctively—not only the birds of the heavens, but *all* the creatures of the earth: “These all look to you, to give them their food in due season” (Ps. 104:27). By seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness, he can trust him to meet all of our other needs as well.

Pause Tomorrow’s Troubles (Matt. 6:34)

Jesus’ final words in this section are somewhat enigmatic, and therefore they are worthy of our contemplation: “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (v. 34). At one level, Jesus is teaching us that “today’s grace is sufficient only for today and should not be wasted on tomorrow. If tomorrow does bring new trouble, there will be new grace to meet it.”¹⁴ Each day brings its own challenges, and we can only live one day at a time as God provides us the grace exclusively *for* that day.

At another level, Jesus may be saying something more: “We translate, ‘into the morrow,’ for εἰς [*eis*; ‘into’] indicates either the limit (as in this case) or the duration (“until”)....We are not to go from today into tomorrow with worry....No, the morrow is never here, it does not exist today. If, then,

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 284.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 217.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:344.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 217–18.

the morrow is to do the worrying, no worrying will ever be done. And that is what Jesus desires.”¹⁵ If Lenski is right, Jesus is not only telling us to cross each bridge only when we get to it, but also that God will carry us across each bridge *when* we arrive. The future can be a constant source of anxiety, while so little of what we worry about ever actually comes to pass. Jesus is teaching us to trust so fully in our heavenly Father’s provision that we are able to give all of our attention to the troubles that immediately face us at any given moment. Even for these, we must not be anxious, but rather to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jesus connect this passage with the previous passage by the word “therefore” (v. 25)? What is the connection between treasuring earthly treasures and being anxious about our lives? What lessons does Jesus say that we should take from the birds of the air and the lilies of the field? Why does he criticize such anxieties as the produce of “little faith” (v. 30)? What is one area of your life that consistently brings you anxiety?
2. What does Jesus mean when he says, “Gentiles seek after all these things” (v. 32a)? What comfort does Jesus offer when he says, “your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all” (v. 32b)? What is “the kingdom of God” (v. 33a)? What is God’s “righteousness” (v. 33b)? How do we pursue such things? On what basis does Jesus promise us that, if we see God’s kingdom and righteousness, “all these things will be added to you” (v. 33c)?
3. Why does Jesus tell us not to be anxious about tomorrow (v. 34)? Why, then, does “tomorrow” produce so much anxiety in our lives? What does this suggest about how we should approach each day of our lives? What concerns do you have right now about your “tomorrow”? Practically speaking, how might you defer your anxiety about about those concerns until the future? Practically speaking, how might you draw upon God’s grace for today?
4. How has anxiety and depression affected your own life? What factors make your anxiety more severe? What strategies do you have to deal with your anxiety? What from this passage stands out most to give you comfort for your anxiety? What does Jesus here teach us about “casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7)? How might we depend more fully on God as our refuge and our strength (Ps. 46:1)?

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 286–87.