

How to stop worrying (and start living): Jesus on anxiety

Extreme Makeover: Soul Edition (Episode 6)
Matthew 6:25-34
John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 3 July 2005

Why worry?

An old man lived alone at his family home in Ruatoria. He wanted to dig his kumara garden, but it was very hard work. His only son, Hone, who used to help him, was in prison. The man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament. "Kia ora, Hone, I am feeling pretty stressed. It looks like I won't be able to plant my kumara garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, all my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me. Anyway, lots of love, Dad." A few days later he received a letter from his son. "Dad, whatever you do, don't dig up that garden, that's where I buried the money!" At 4.00am the next morning, the Gisborne C.I.B and local police showed up with a search warrant and dug up the entire area, without finding any loot. They apologized to the old man and left. Later that same day the man received another letter from his son. "Dad, hopefully you should be able to plant the kumara now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances. Love, Hone."

I was reading this week about a bright young company executive named J. Clifford Baxter. He had been a rising star in the big American energy trading company Enron that went belly up at the end of 2001, amid a major scandal over shonky deals and shredded documents. The 43-year-old Baxter had resigned as Vice Chairman long before the scandal broke. It turns out that he was really worried about dark financial dealings within the company. Baxter, who had cashed out of Enron with probably around \$30 million, would probably have been cleared of any wrongdoing. He was actually one of the "good guys." So when he left the firm he was very well off, with loads of time to relax with his wife and kids on his 72 foot sailboat. But that's not what happened. The reports say that the note Baxter left beside the .38 calibre revolver in his Mercedes expressed deep anxiety at the prospect of having to testify against former colleagues and friends. Apparently, the anxiety was simply too great.

Several years ago the National Anxiety Centre in America released its list of the "Top Ten Anxieties" for the 1990s. The list included AIDS, drug abuse, nuclear waste, and famine. Since then, in light of September 11 and other events, the centre has revised its list to put global terrorism as the leading source of anxiety. If you were making a list of your top ten worries, what would they be? What would top the list? Work? Study? Family? Finances? Health? We would all have different lists, but I reckon most of the items would concern our everyday material needs. And most of our worries have the effect of sucking the joy and peace from our lives.

What's the solution?

So there are countless books and magazines out there offering various solutions to the problem of worry. Some give practical and sensible advice: get more exercise or sleep or medication. Others are more bizarre. One women's magazine has an article on how to reduce your stress by half. It listed ten "stress beaters." They ranged from ripping up magazines or beating up your pillow, through to sniffing a special blend of armpit and mammary gland secretion. Anyone tried that?

In Matthew 6:25-34, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlines his prescription for overcoming anxiety. Notice that three times Jesus repeats the phrase: "Do not worry" (vv 25, 32, 34). Don't stress. Don't be anxious about your kumara garden. We don't have much time, but in this passage Jesus outlines a list of three stress beaters, three ways to stop worrying and start living...

Consider how much God cares for you (vv 25-30)

He starts with this intriguing phrase: "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" (v 25). This is what philosophers call an *a fortiori* type argument – an argument with the form: "If this, then how much more that!" Probably the most famous example of this reasoning in the Bible is Romans 8:32: "If God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" *If* God has given us his very best gift – his own Son – *how much more* likely is it that he will he give us anything else we need? The reasoning is the same here. *If* God has given us life – if he carefully designed our bodies and personalities (an extraordinary feat!) – *how much more* can we trust him to do something relatively simple like give us food and clothes and everything else needed to sustain our lives. The logic is inescapable. Jesus reinforces it in verse 27 with the question: "And who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" The sentence can also be translated, "Who of you by worrying can add a single inch to your height?" None of us can. Only God can do that – which I discovered, much to my dismay, when I was a very short ten-year old with a crush

on an unusually tall, slender girl called Debbie. The point that Jesus makes is this. If we leave the issue of growth or life to God, wouldn't it also be sensible to trust him for lesser things, like food and clothes?

This very same reasoning is behind the examples Jesus gives from the world of nature. "See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin" (v 28). They don't form floral corporations and set five-year growth goals. They don't attend motivational seminars on how to release the sleeping kauri within them. Yet, next to them, the richest king in all the world, clothed in his most glorious finery, looks like a rough tramp. Now, *if* God gives such attention to wild flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow – most of which are never seen – *how much more* likely is he to attend to you and your needs? So that's the first stress-buster. Whatever it is you're worried about, consider how much your heavenly Father has already expressed his care for you. You can trust him with the future.

Calculate the worth of worry (v 34)

At the very end of the passage, in v 34, Jesus says, "Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." The word translated "worry" comes from the Greek verb *merimnao*, meaning "to be divided or distracted." It is the same word used of Martha, Mary's sister, who was "distracted" from what was really important by all her worries (Luke 10:40). Worry about tomorrow distracts us from the issues we need to face today. It divides our attention, reduces our ability to deal with the pressures we face now. So worrying is counterproductive. It's stupid. Eugene Peterson translates this verse: "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow." Our fears about tomorrow, which we feel so acutely today, may never even happen. Winston Churchill once said, "When I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man who said on his death bed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened." So when you calculate the worth of worrying, you realise that it's a waste, a waste of time and energy. Listen to this from Fiona Castle, who had to face the stress of her husband Roy Castle's battle against cancer.

"Recently a friend commented to me that many people live their life as though it were a dress rehearsal for the real thing. But in fact, by tonight, we will have given the only performance of 'today' that we will ever give. So we have to put our heart, our energy, and honesty and sincerity into what we do every day."

You can spend your lifetime worrying about tomorrow. But if you do, you'll lose your life.

Concern yourself with God's kingdom and righteousness (vv 31-33)

The ultimate answer to worry is concern ourselves with God's kingdom. In v 33 Jesus says, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In other words, "don't focus on yourself, your security, your success. Shift your focus onto God, and his will, his rule, his presence in your life, and he will take care of your needs. I was reading this week about a guy in the food service industry called Nicholas Herman. He had done stints in the military and transportation but now was a cook. A cook who worried chronically. One day, he was looking at a tree and the truth struck him that the secret of the life of a tree is that it remains rooted in something other and deeper than itself. He decided to make his life an experiment in what he called a "habitual, silent, secret conversation of the soul with God." He made it his ambition to experience the presence of God – the reign of God – in every moment of his life. Eventually, with practice, he did. He discovered God was everywhere, in every moment of every day, waiting to fill him with a sense of love, joy and peace.

That's the message of the Bible. That's the message Jesus preached. The kingdom of God is here. God's Spirit really is present in every moment of every day, waiting to meet us and fill us with his peace and strength in the midst of our stresses. If we'll just choose it.

The wealthy Baron Fitzgerald had only one son and heir, who died after leaving home. This was a tragedy from which the father never recovered. As his wealth increased, the Baron continued to invest in paintings by the great masters, and when he died his will was found to call for all his paintings to be sold. Because of their quality and artistic value, messages were sent out to museums and collectors, advertising the sale. When the day of the auction came, a large crowd assembled and the lawyer read from Fitzgerald's will. It instructed that the first painting to be sold was that "of my beloved son." The portrait was by an unknown artist and it was of poor quality. The only bidder was an old servant who had known and loved the boy. For a small sum of money he bought it for sentimental value and the memories it held for him. The attorney again read from the will, "Whoever buys my son gets it all. The auction is over." "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well."