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Sermon

Don't Worry

Isaiah 49:8-16; Matthew 6:24-34

2nd March 2014

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As we continue with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, this section starts with a choice. He says, you cannot serve God and money. We think we would like to work in both camps. But the Master says, you cannot. We need to realise he is not talking about dallying with God and dallying with money. The word 'serve' relates to slavery. You cannot be a slave of two masters. One or other will control you. Jesus gives us freedom to choose but not forever. Will we be a love-slave of God or will we be enslaved by the pursuit of wealth?

Jesus continues with teaching which our culture ignores. Essentially, don't worry! Don't worry about material things - what you eat, what you drink, what you wear. He is not saying this because he is impractical – he was a carpenter – how much more practical do you want? He is saying that God is well able to provide all we need.

He gives two examples – the birds and the flowers.

He tells us to think about the birds. Think how beautiful they are, how they are fed from nature by God – note that it is God who feeds them but it is through the processes of nature. They don't work for it. You don't see birds sowing seed and coming back to reap it in the autumn and gathering grain into barns. But your heavenly father feeds them AND YOU ARE WORTH FAR MORE THAN THEY! Whatever way money comes to us, whether as wages, salary, dividends, pension, benefits, rents, gifts or interest - ultimately God is the provider. He can turn it on or off. And we need to acknowledge his provision for us. We need to trust him and thank him for it. We need to acknowledge his provision and honour him by returning a portion of our income to him as he instructs us to.

He is not saying don't think on the contrary considering the birds requires thinking. He does not speak against forethought or making provision – the Bible is clear about that in other places. Even the example of the birds shows us instinctive forethought in building nests and migration.

No - Jesus says, "DON'T WORRY!" Worry doesn't change things or help. This is a command – we need to take it seriously and learn to obey him. Bishop Ryle wrote of this passage, "Prudent provision for the future is right; wearing, corroding, self-tormenting anxiety is wrong."¹

¹ Quoted by John Stott in *BST: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 2nd Ed. 1992, IVP Leicester, p163

Can you prolong your life by worrying about it? How many of you have extended your life or increased your height by your disciplined daily worrying? None of you – it doesn't work.

He says don't worry about clothing. The flowers are arrayed so beautifully and they don't work for it. I remember a letter to the editor of the *Herald* years ago which complained of a domestic appliance that had failed. It read, "My washing machine is like the lilies of the valley, it neither toils nor does it spin!"

Jesus said, "Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these [flowers]. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"²

He is referring the wild flowers growing among the grasses of the field. The Judean hills are famous for the sudden flowering which follows rain. Overnight the bare hills are covered with glorious colours of a profusion of flowers. Then he makes this odd reference to the grass being thrown into an oven. I used to wonder about that statement and think, "Surely you wouldn't burn grass in a fire and why would you put it in an oven?" Then when Helen and I visited Israel we were taken to a Druze village somewhere north of the Golan Heights. There we saw girls cooking unleavened bread on a steel plate over a fire. When she needed more heat, she grasped a handful of straw and thrust it in the fire. Then I understood what Jesus was referring to. Grass was used as a cheap, light fuel. Need to turn the element up a bit? Throw some more grass on the fire.

Where does that take us? The point is that this grass is beautifully arrayed with wild flowers by God even though it is destined simply to be eaten by animals or to wither and rot or be burned. But Jesus assures us that we are of far more value than the grass and so we can rely on God to clothe us also.

Jesus says, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Isn't that good to hear? Daddy knows we need them – he will provide and he has more important things for our energies:

Verse 33: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

You may find yourself thinking, this is unrealistic – bad things do happen to people. Jesus doesn't say they won't; he says don't worry about it. John Stott gave a powerful example from a Germany preacher at the close of WWII. Dr Helmut Thielicke ministered at St Mark's Church, Stuttgart.

"He alluded to the scream of air-raid sirens, alerting people to yet more devastation and death from allied bombs. What could freedom from anxiety mean in such circumstances? 'We know the sight and the sound of homes collapsing in families Our own eyes have seen the red blaze and our own ears have heard the sound of crashing, falling and shrieking.' Against that background the command to look at the birds and the lilies might well have sounded hollow. 'Nevertheless, I think we must stop and listen when this man, whose life on earth was anything but birdlike and lilylike, points us to the carefreeness of the birds and lilies. Were not the sombre shadows of the Cross already looming over this hour of the Sermon on the Mount?' In other words, it is reasonable to trust our heavenly Father's love, even in times of grievous trouble, because we are privileged to see it revealed in Christ and his cross."³

The Old Testament reading is one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah. It is clear with New Testament hindsight that the Servant here is the Messiah.

² Matthew 6:29-30

³ Stott, 1992, p168

The Messiah will shepherd his people. In a description like Psalm 23, he will guide them to find pasture and lead them by springs of water. People will come to him from afar. There is to be great rejoicing for Yahweh comforts his people; he has compassion on his afflicted people. When his people feel they are forgotten or forsaken, his reply is that he could no more forget his people than a mother can forget her nursing baby. What a tender image! Can a mother fail to have compassion on her own child? Even if she were to forget her child, God will never forget his people.

Look he says, "I have written you on my hand." Do you do that to remember something – write it on your hand? What does he mean when he says that? We have already said this passage applies to the Messiah, to Jesus. And his hands were pierced with nails. Why? to save his people. How could he forget his people when he paid such a price for them? How could we ever imagine he might have forgotten us when he has suffered so for us.

From the New Testament Jesus tells us that he doesn't want us to worry about daily provision but to trust him. From the Old Testament, we hear of his care, his provision, his suffering, his attention on us. Can I urge you then when fears and anxieties rise - take control of your thoughts and fears. When the fears get large – tell those fears off! Do it out loud. Tell the enemy you won't listen to him but only to God. Quote some of these scriptures to give yourself a good foundation for your trust and confidence.

When you have a need, ask God for his specific provision; make the choice to trust him, give thanks and let him provide. Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."⁴ He did not say, "Let your complaints be made known to God with grizzling!" James wrote, "You do not have, because you do not ask God."⁵ How often people complain about a problem, but they haven't seriously asked God for the solution, rather they have just told everyone about the difficulty.

Besides refusing to worry, Jesus tells us to seek his rule in our lives. We need to put ourselves under his authority; obey him and do things his way. As we delight ourselves in him, our thoughts change, our fears reduce, our joy grows and our faith rises.

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⁴ Philippians 4:6

⁵ James 4:2