

Overcoming anxiety – What Jesus teaches (1)

Please read **Matthew 6: 25-34**; then pray;

Lord, open my eyes to see wonderful things in your Word, and open my heart to receive your truth in all its power and purity. Amen

The Sermon on the Mount which is recorded for us in Matthew 5-7 is often described as the greatest piece of moral teaching in the world. It came from the lips of Jesus Christ and was delivered specifically to **his disciples** (5:1) to teach them what it meant to live as his devoted followers according to the ethics and the call of the kingdom of heaven.

In the heart of this sermon the Lord Jesus addresses the subject of **anxiety**. He has just finished teaching on the subject of storing up “*treasures on earth*” and “*money*”, which are often a major **cause of anxiety**. He contrasts this with storing up “*treasures in heaven*”, and possessing “*God as treasure in the heart*,” which by contrast are a major cause of joy. Jesus then faces the subject of anxiety square on.

Anxiety has the ability to blight the life of any individual. It is primarily a state of mind which induces fear and sometimes panic; it disables a person in many ways, particularly from thinking calmly and clearly and acting with good judgement. Anxiety can and does cripple lives and cause dysfunctionality especially when combined with depression. There is right now, it seems, unparalleled anxiety and mental ill health seeping into our nation because of the coronavirus and resultant lockdown. Anxiety can run wild with the imagination and run riot in our hearts and minds adversely affecting the whole of our personality and behaviour.

I can only look at how Jesus addresses this subject of anxiety fairly briefly, but I will examine this with you a second time at the beginning of next month, and then consider St Paul’s deeply connected teaching in Philippians 4 (4:6 f) on this vital and relevant subject. Overall, there will be 4 bible centred sermons on this subject. I sincerely hope they encourage you.

It is important to stress that this teaching **can only** help believers and followers of Christ. Jesus’s sermon is given for followers. There are dozens of secular self-help books available from good bookstores which address the topic of managing or overcoming anxiety – but this teaching of Jesus can only be accessed and appreciated by disciples of Christ.

From verses 25-34 of Matthew chapter 6, Jesus’s big concern is to help his disciples with the subject of anxiety – particularly anxiety they may feel about having the basic necessities of life, such as food, drink, clothing and shelter. There are many things which cause anxiety today including broken relationships, failed marriages, economic and financial burdens, health concerns, terrorist attacks, an uncertain and uncontrollable future – but Jesus here talks with his disciples about handling anxiety over the basic necessities of life which were relevant to them and many of the “poor in spirit”. However, the teaching can and should be applied to other issues that stir up anxiety in the heart and mind.

Notice **3 times** Jesus says to his disciples, “**Do not worry!**” (v 25, v 31 and 34). Jesus clearly wants to hammer home a message, because as we will see, worry is not just something that

can hamper and choke life and productive service and fruitful activity for the Kingdom (13:22), but it is actually a sin. Jesus is forbidding worry outright because it ultimately reveals a clear lack of trust and belief in God the Father. Worry forgets and neglects God.

So how does Jesus help his disciples? What teaching does he give? What is at the heart of this message concerning overcoming anxiety?

Jesus takes the disciples *and us* straight back to where we ***always need to be***, and where the understanding of *our faith* must be pivoted and centred. Jesus takes the disciples back to **their doctrine of God**. He reveals that the main starting point for addressing and overcoming any anxiety is to begin with our **knowledge of God**. It is a “faith issue” and those with “little faith” (v30) must understand and know their God, and *apply their knowledge of God* to this challenge of anxiety. As Daniel 11:32 reminds us – it is those who *know their God* who are strong and can resist whatever assails them!

Here is the crucial starting point. What is your knowledge of God? What do you believe and know about God? What is your relationship to God? Problems occur in believers whenever there is a defective or inadequate knowledge of God!

There are two great aspects to Jesus’s teaching about God (his Father) in this amazing passage. The first aspect of Jesus’s teaching about God refers to what is often called the “universal grace of God” or the “common grace of God.” This is the biblical teaching which includes a biblical cosmology – a biblical understanding of the origin and the ongoing sustenance of the whole universe. The bible teaches quite clearly and categorically that Almighty God is not only the great and awesome Creator of all things “in heaven and on earth” (Genesis 1:1), but that God is also responsible for sustaining and maintaining all ongoing life in this world. It is God’s world! The Lord reigns over all! (Psalm 97:1)

The doctrine of common or universal grace teaches us that God upholds and controls all things by and through his sovereign power, word, wisdom and grace. He sustains and nourishes human life, human beings made in his image, but also the life of all his creatures/creation on the earth and in the seas, and Jesus specifically mentions here birds and flowers around the Galilean countryside. (Read again v 26-30)

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world *and all who live in it* for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters” (Psalm 24 v 1-2)

“The Lord who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and he does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because *he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else*” (Acts 17:24 - 25). Later in v 28 we read. “For in him we live and move and have our being.”

“The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (Psalm 145: 9, 15-16)

Elsewhere in this gospel of Matthew, Jesus states; “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of my Father. And even the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10: 29-31)

Referring to Jesus himself – the Son of God – the author of Hebrews writes; “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, **sustaining all things by his powerful word.**” (Hebrews 1:3)

This is the essence of common or universal grace. The bible is full of such teaching. All life is held and sustained by God the Creator according to his sovereign will, mercy and grace. We are all recipients of this universal grace, for as Jesus also taught in this sermon, God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5 :45). Our harvests are all ultimately “sent from heaven above”. God maintains the seasonal patterns for our benefit and blessing.

But there is **a second very significant** and telling element to Jesus’s teaching on God in this part and many other parts of the Sermon on the Mount – and **this is the most vital thing** for us to grasp for the theme of anxiety.

Twice in this passage Jesus refers to God as “**your heavenly Father**”. (Read v 26, v 32). You also have this phrase and truth about “your heavenly Father” in many places in this sermon. (Matthew 5:16, 5:44, 5:48, 6:1, 6:4, 6:6, 6:9, 6: 14-15, 6:18, 7:11)

Notice – God is THE HEAVENLY FATHER **of the disciples**. Disciples of Jesus *actually know* God as THEIR heavenly Father. This is their living experience and joy. They have come into a glorious relationship with the Living, Reigning, Sovereign God of all creation. Disciples of Christ enjoy a precious and personal knowledge as God as *their Father God*. Jesus’s Father becomes *their heavenly Father*. (John 20:17, Romans 1:7, I Corinthians 1:3)

This is such an important part of our knowledge of God as Christians, and of our unique saving and loving personal relationship with God – God the Father, God our Father – especially in relation to fear and anxiety.

By receiving Christ, by believing on him, by accepting Christ as Lord and Saviour, we also receive and come **to know** his Father as *our Father*. This is Christianity and Christian discipleship at its core. It involves the **doctrine of adoption** – being personally chosen and adopted into God’s family. Father God I wonder how I managed to exist without the knowledge of your parenthood and your loving care as the praise song spells it out.

Read John 1 v 10-13 (“he gave them the right to **BECOME children of God**”)

Because the disciples “know” God as their very own heavenly Father says Jesus, they need not be anxious for anything. The necessities and needs of life will be provided by a Father who knows their needs and loves them perfectly. If God provides for simple birds and beautiful transient hillside flowers which are here today and then used in the oven as fuel fodder for baking just days later, He will certainly provide for you. Your heavenly Father who has adopted

you will always be 100% committed to caring for your material needs and providing for you. You need not fear or be anxious whatever the external pressures or adverse circumstances you face in your life. Your heavenly Father will provide. Jehovah Jireh – God my Provider!

This is the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills and whose wealth, power and love are unlimited. He loves his own. You are the sheep of his pasture – the flock *under his very own care*. (Psalm 100:3) You are the apple of his eye. (Zechariah 2:8) You are now the sons and daughters of the Father, adopted into God's eternal family, joint heirs with Christ, filled with the Spirit of adoption; (Romans 8: 15-17) The Spirit enables you to pray intimately about every need, concern and burden to *your heavenly Father*. You can pray, as the Lord's prayer in this Sermon teaches from its first line; "Our Father in heaven" and then go on to pray daily; "Give us this day our daily bread." The Father will faithfully supply his own children's needs.

If God has provided for the birds to eat – He will provide for those of much greater value, those made in his image and personally called to be his children. If this God has already given you the ultimate gift of his Son who gave his life for you on the cross – ***how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things. Who can bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?*** (Romans 8: 31-33) This is the apostles Paul's great argument in Romans.

This is the "how much more" teaching that highlights the special love the Father has for his own children on whom He has lavished his love upon. (1 John 3:1)

"Which of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, ***how much more will YOUR FATHER in heaven*** give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7: 9-10).

If we are to master anxiety as Christians, our greatest need is to personally know and grasp and always remember that this great God is ***our Father*** who deeply cares for us and is committed to our material as well as our spiritual and eternal welfare. We are in covenant with the Father. He is the Father of all who know and embrace Jesus his own Son. Believers rest in the security of this knowledge and loving relationship. They personally know God as "Abba Father." (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6-7). They are watched over and kept and loved by God the Father (Psalm 121) and by the Lord Jesus (Jude 1:1). Even God's angels can be despatched to minister to those who will inherit salvation as his children. (Hebrews 1:14). Our times are in the hands of our Father in heaven. (Psalm 31:15, Psalm 139:16)

Anxiety ends where true faith in the heavenly Father begins! Knowing God as our Father is the supreme antidote to all anxiety! This is the teaching of Christ himself! Anxious thoughts dissipate where faith in God as our constantly caring Father begins to take root and grow strong through the life-line of prayer, and the nurturing of a different focus which "seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." (Matthew 6:33). We will come on to this next time!

Anxiety eases – and then disappears when we learn to truly trust and rest secure in the love of "our Father who is in heaven", but whose Spirit of adoption is in our hearts.

When I said, “My foot is slipping”, your love, O Lord supported me. When anxiety was great within me, ***your consolation*** brought joy to my soul.” Psalm 94:18-19

This is the word of the Lord! Receive it. Apply it. Live in its light, power and freedom.

Amen