

Overcoming Anxiety (2)

Please read Matthew 6 v 25-34 and then pray;

“Dear Heavenly Father, may your Word be a light for my pathway and a lamp which guides all my footsteps, now and always, Amen.

We come to our second consideration of how Christians can face and overcome the challenge of anxiety. Once again, we come at the subject from the angle of the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We find our Saviour’s teaching on this subject in the heart of his Sermon on the Mount which is in the gospel of Matthew (5-7). This is therefore the teaching of God who became man in Christ, and who faced the test of anxiety himself but overcame as he continually placed himself into the hands and will of **his heavenly Father**.

As the author to the Hebrews makes crystal clear;

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (Hebrews 5:7)

It is important to reassert the critical lesson from Jesus’s teaching concerning anxiety that we learned last time. What is the main way that disciples of Jesus can overcome anxiety - any anxiety? According to our Lord, the personal, living knowledge that God is truly **your heavenly Father** (see v 26 & 32) is the key to conquering anxiety. Understanding and knowing that the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe is “your heavenly Father” who deeply cares for you and will provide for your needs is the antidote to the burden of anxiety. Read again my sermon **Overcoming Anxiety 1** to understand why this is so important and essential. But here is a quotation from the climax of that sermon;

Anxiety ends where true faith in the heavenly Father begins. Knowing God as our heavenly Father is the supreme antidote to all anxiety. This is the teaching of Christ himself. Anxious thoughts dissipate where faith in God as our caring and overseeing Father begin to take root - and then grow strong through the gift of prayer – and also through the nurturing of a different focus which “seeks first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness” (6:33).

Christian’s have true fellowship with the Father through the Son (1 John 1:3) and it is a fellowship that promotes and provides a deep-seated joy and peace. The Father who actually gave us the great and precious gift of his only Son to save us, will certainly provide for all our other needs (Romans 8:32). There is no need to be anxious. Our Father will provide for our present and future needs – material and spiritual. He faithfully cares for his *own children* – his *own sheep*, and that is what Christ’s followers are. This is what we have become in Christ – **children of God**. (John 1:12, 1 John 3:1, Matthew 7: 7-11). No way will such a perfect Father ever abandon or forget his own precious children who have been bought through the blood of his only begotten Son! No way! It’s an impossibility!

Let’s just think about one practical example relating to anxiety – and one which is very prevalent right now in this strangest of years – 2020 - *anxiety over death*. Fear is a dominating

force in the world right now due to Covid 19, and anxiety about death is rife among our population. But Jesus says to his disciples, they need not be anxious at all about death and what lies beyond death because **the Father** (our Father) and his Son have all things under their control, power and love. The famous words in John 14:1 are extremely helpful;

Do not let your hearts be troubled (be anxious). Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Jesus categorically promises his disciples that the Father and the Son are preparing a special place for us to live after we die. The Father will not lose one his children. The Good Shepherd will not lose one of his sheep (**John 10:28-30**). The exalted Son and the Father abide in an eternal house. Jesus's Father is our Father (John 20:17). His home is our eternal room. Our rooms are prepared for us, ready and waiting. As the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians;

Now we KNOW that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 5:1)

So, God in Christ says to his children, to you and to me; *Do not let your hearts be anxious or troubled about death. The future for you is safe, secure and truly blessed. Your room in the eternal house is ready and waiting for you. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)*

So, when dealing with the issue of anxiety, Jesus begins and builds up the kernel of his teaching around *our correct understanding of God as our caring heavenly Father*. You begin to conquer all anxieties through personally knowing God as your Father.

The song by Ian Smale puts it so well;

Father God I wonder how I managed to exist without the knowledge of your parenthood and your loving care. But now I am your child, I am adopted in your family, and I can never be alone because Father God, you're there beside me."

Pastorally speaking, one of the greatest truths you can know is that God is your heavenly Father and that you are of infinite value to Him. For this pastoral reason Paul **begins** so many of his letters reminding Christians in his Churches that God is THEIR FATHER, as well as the Father of the Lord Jesus. Here is just one such example from the beginning of Galatians;

*Grace and peace to you from God **our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our **God and Father**, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5)*

Do you know God as your Father? Have you become a child of God through belief in Christ his Son? Are you adopted into God's own family? Does the Holy Spirit of adoption live in you?

(Romans 8: 15-17). When you pray, do you know approach God as “Abba” – Father? My/Our Father.

But there is a second lesson that Jesus teaches in Matthew 6 with regard to overcoming anxiety. He firstly teaches that we need to *understand* something – that God is our heavenly Father (26 & 32), but then he teaches us that we need a new and *different focus* and passion for our lives. We must “seek **FIRST** the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

Overcoming anxiety involves knowing God as Father, but also pursuing his Kingdom (His reign) above all things. Put God’s Kingdom first in your life says Jesus – and everything else will fall into place – and God will meet all your needs according to the riches and resources of *this glorious and eternal Kingdom*. (Philippians 4:19-20)

Let’s think about this challenge that Jesus puts before his disciples of seeking God’s kingdom and righteousness above all other things. What does this mean for us and how does it help with anxiety?

Seeking or pursuing or running after God’s Kingdom for the follower of Christ is contrasted with the pagan’s passionate desire to run after the idols of great food and drink, fashionable clothes and possessions (v32). The Christian should instead passionately pursue God’s Kingdom – which is the same as saying – God’s rule and God’s will. We are back to the Lord’s prayer which is also in this Sermon on the Mount;

Our Father (my Father), who is in heaven - your Kingdom come, your will be done, in my life, through my life – and throughout all your world. (Matthew 6:9-10)

Jesus is teaching that as we seek with all our hearts to pursue **God’s will for our lives**, and as we actually practise God’s will in the world, we will discover such a true peace and joy and sense of God’s blessing and kingly presence – that anxiety will be squeezed out of our lives more and more. As we allow God to reign within us, as we allow his kingdom to dominate our thinking and our lives and our activities, the active presence of his rule, his Kingdom in our hearts, will deal a significant blow to anxiety.

How does this work? The reign or Kingdom of God (heaven on earth in our hearts) brings such a sense of God’s presence and perfection that anxieties struggle to dominate. In heaven there is *no anxiety* because there is no pain, no stress, no suffering, no tears, no imperfections or lack of anything good or holy. Therefore, the more of heaven we taste now, on earth, in our hearts and lives, the less we will be troubled by anxious feelings and thoughts. Heaven is **perfect love** and perfect love casts out fear and anxiety (1 John 4:18). The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption, by His presences, brings that foretaste of heaven to live within us now – in this life – with all its pressures and troubles. His presence is the first-fruits of the heavenly life to come. (Romans 8:23, Ephesians 1: 13-14). The first-fruits of a reign where there is simply no anxiety or pain or suffering.

So, for followers of Christ – pursuing God’s will – doing God’s will – provides us with a different focus which increases the sense and knowledge of God’s Kingdom and blessing within us. ***Who are the most peaceful, calm, assured and clear minded Christians you have ever***

known? Are they not the ones who have persistently sought first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness? Are they not the ones who have served God faithfully in the world, in their places of work, and within the life of the Church? Are they not the ones who have walked in the light of Christ and his Kingdom, and understood through prayer that God is their loving, caring, faithful Father?

When facing anxieties, the thing to do is **not** to step back and step down from working for Christ and his kingdom. Resist that temptation. Instead, continue to pursue kingdom work and honour God with the gifts He has graciously given you. Keep on seeking first the kingdom and the righteousness of God. Live righteously. Live justly. Exercise mercy and kindness consistently. Release forgiveness toward others. Do not allow any anxiety to paralyse your service for Christ. Honour the Lord with your service for His Kingdom and He will honour you with his presence, grace, favour and peace. Cast your burdens on the Lord and he will lift you up in die time, in due course. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

We will always go on facing the challenge of anxiety in this world, because it is a broken, fallen and turbulent world where sin and suffering dominate. But whenever anxieties arise, and they will, Jesus urges us to remember, that His Father is also **our** caring, faithful Father, and that in the midst of all the challenges we face, we must go on seeking first the Kingdom and the righteousness of God. We must open our lives up to reign of God, to the Kingdom of heaven – to the perfect heaven-sent love of God in Jesus, which kicks out fear and fans into flame (within us) a peace which passes all human understanding. (Philippians 4:4-7) This is the divine peace which guards and shields our troubled hearts and minds. We will go on to think about the presence of this peace next week. This is the peace that draws swords with anxiety and subdues it.

But for now, hear and receive and hold on to the words of Christ our King.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled (anxious) and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Amen

Revd Peter J Clarkson: November 1st 2020