

Casting Aside Our Anxieties

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series drawn from Philippians

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Matthew 6:25–33 (NIV)

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”

²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If 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—you of little faith? ³¹So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

1 Peter 5:6–11 (NRSV)

⁶Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 4:4–13 (NIV)

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

“Do not be anxious about anything.” Really?

Whoever wrote that must not have lived in the same world I do!

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In the first century, people were no less anxious and stressed out than we are now, even when times were good – much less than when they were bad.

For the ancients, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn’t control their capricious gods, they’d simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.¹ Others, like the

¹Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that “Epicureanism” has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called “contentment.”²

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is

Excellence and the Virtues

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In Philippians 4:8, when Paul urges the Philippians to dwell upon the things of “excellence,” he uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more and I think Paul uses it for that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God’s creation point us toward God; it is all to God’s glory. In the goodness of this world we can glimpse the kingdom of God. This is why Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we actually *be* excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us.

The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good.

We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don’t talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own desire for Christlikeness. When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are dwelling upon God and the things of God. N.T. Wright had this to say about raising our eyes, “How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?”

as if Peter writes, “let go and let God.” It is God who will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant against the work of Satan. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: “this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.”

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as “content” (*autarkes* in the Greek, v.12). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.³ But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the “content” person couldn’t be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different; contentment is resting in the Lord, whatever comes.

Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his “secret”? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul’s secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist’s portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will “fear no evil,” confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul’s cup will always overflow – in all

²For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

³For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul’s appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. The Greeks had always questioned the nature of “being.” Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and “have our being.” He talked to them about Jesus, but in their own words and ideas. Paul knew that all truth is God’s truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God's house forever, because nothing – “not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul's joyful contentment and Peter's and our own.

Unlearning “self-reliance”

Both Peter and Paul point us in the same direction – toward God. Peterson renders 1 Peter 5:6-7 this way: “So be content with who you are, and don't put on airs. God's strong hand is on you; he'll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.”

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to “pull myself up by the bootstraps.” Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tent-maker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn't stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God's agent, not God's puppet. “Contentment” for Paul and Peter did not mean just laying back and waiting for life to run you over.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others, we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to fellowship.

More even than that, we are dependent upon God. Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people makes us realize that we are dependent upon God. It is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do, even as our own work and efforts are necessary.

“Do not worry”

And so, both Peter and Paul lead us back to Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Don't worry, Jesus says. Yeah right. Will worrying add a single hour to your life? Well no . . . but still. For too much of my life, I never heard Jesus well on this.

Perhaps that explains why I paid so little attention to the last verse: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” I paid little attention, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section! In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, “strive” is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God's kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: “This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one's existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one's heart.” Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God's rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. I can forswear thievery even in a land in which it is condoned. Even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God's law. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God's moral will, for that is true righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount is an extended block of Jesus' teachings about the nature of God's will for our lives, about what it means to be righteous, to do right in God's sight.

Jesus says if we strive first for God's kingdom, then “all these things will be given to you as well.” What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I

doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn't speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët-Chandon, and designer clothes. We have a way of making "wants" into seeming "needs." To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need "is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want," leading to "a blurring of needs and wants." The result is what he calls the "tyranny of the unnecessary." And it is this very tyranny that keeps us from sharing in the contentment enjoyed by Paul. He has forsaken the tyranny of the unnecessary and its attendant anxieties for the abundant life in the kingdom. So can we!

The Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, "strive first for the kingdom of God," what is he talking about? It is a lot less abstract than you probably think and, no, it isn't a place in your heart. The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus' day waited for the coming of this kingdom – an actual kingdom. When God again reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . and the Jews had waited for a long time. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' very first words are a blazing proclamation:

*'The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent! And believe in the Good News!'*

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God's kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God's glory was shining upon them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God's kingdom or tell us to strive for it?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, "Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way." The kingdom of God is present, but not fully. We are to strive to live as if God's kingdom is fully present, leading lives of righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. From this will flow our heart's true desire.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Here is the bottom line – why is it so hard for us to shed worry and anxiety? What makes us cling to our worries if they are precious possessions? Make a list of reasons. What can we do to learn and apply what Peter and Paul learned about relying upon God's strength and care? How can we help each other in this? How do we truly become content and joyful in all circumstances, knowing that God's riches are all we really need? Do we even really believe that God's riches are all we need? This is the time for honesty!
2. Discuss the "tyranny of the unnecessary." How might we more clearly distinguish between our needs and our wants? Where do we begin in the reshaping of our desires?
3. *Striving for the kingdom of God.* This can seem so abstract. How can we make it more concrete?
 - Discuss my analogy to living by U.S. law even in a lawless land. Is the analogy helpful? How? What do you think it means to be strive for "righteousness?" Could it be as plain as always seeking to do what is right? How do we know what is right?
 - What does doing right have to do with achieving the life God desires for us? If you think of God's Law as a list of arbitrary rules, it may be hard to see the connection between doing right and the abundant life. But if God's Law shows us the way toward being truly human, then the connection is clearer.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 30 God is faithful and desires that his people choose life, the Good Life. This begins with God's Law, the expression of God's moral will.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Kings 3 Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Note how God promises Solomon more than Solomon ever imagined, so long as Solomon follows God's Law.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Psalm 16 A song of trust and security in God – "You show me the path of life."</p>	<p>Thursday, Proverbs 3:13-33 The true wealth and the true security</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 Paul writes about the shape of a life pleasing to God.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

