

Keep your Lamp Burning: help for the anxious  
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Today is our last installment in our 3 week focus on anxiety. You'll notice from the visual on the screen that these sermons fit into our sermon series called *Keep your Lamp Burning*. That statement and charge from Jesus, which we will read explicitly in vs. 35, is a summons to be ready, to be prepared. Opposition will intensify. And with that increased opposition because of your faith comes greater temptations; temptations to be hypocritical, temptations to recant your faith and walk away. You might be tempted to hoard as much as possible thinking you can save your life by accumulating as much as possible. And, as we've been highlighting these last few weeks, anxiety will mount as opposition increases and possessions dwindle. Get ready.

One of the things I've been stressing is that while the temptation to be anxious might increase due to trouble and opposition, we don't have to be helpless. After the first sermon on anxiety, one my sons said to me on our way home from church that morning, "I bet some people with anxiety didn't like what you said today." I asked him to elaborate and he said, "Well, it sounded like you were saying that a person's anxiety was their own fault." That was really insightful; so we talked it out on the way home. He caught the right intuition that I'm trying to get across to you that we have some responsibility for our anxiety. You might remember me saying that anxiety is mostly due to our thoughts, our actions, our expectations, and beliefs... *ours*. If they are ours then we bear some responsibility. We need to change our thinking; we need to change our behavior, adjust our expectations and change the course of our life and seek God's kingdom. That's a challenging message to hear at anytime, but with our culture embracing a victim mentality more and more where nothing is ever your responsibility, it's always someone else's responsibility, it's even more difficult to accept. But remarkably and counter-culturally, this is where the hope lies.

In TS Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, a character is telling her psychiatrist about all the troubles in her life. She says to her counselor that she hopes all her troubles are her own fault. The psychiatrist is rather taken back by her statement and asks, "Why?" And she tells him, "If it's my fault, then I can do something about it." There's an interesting irony to admitting some responsibility for your anxiety; it's your gateway to finding help. If you throw your hands up in the air and see yourself as only a victim to the troubles of life and anxiety, you're hopeless; you have nothing to do other than complain how life is stacked against you. But when you take some responsibility of your anxiety, you've already taken a step towards healing. It's not totally up to you; we all need God to work his grace. But God grants us the teaching and the encouragement to position ourselves so that we benefit from his grace rather than reject it.

But there's a way in which anxiety isn't our fault, either. In my experience of working with anxious people over the years, I've come to learn that anxiety finds people. Some of that is due to the difficulties of life; the stress our troubles place on us break us at a point of weakness. Sometimes, anxiety is just a natural step towards growth and maturity like falling down is a

natural step for children learning to walk or ride a bike. God himself will permit such things to find us so that he can keep changing us. In the life of a follower of Jesus, anxiety is a way in which God points out to us points of weakness in our soul and character that he wants to strengthen and refine. And remember what God says in his word: God brings this challenges into the lives of his children whom he loves. So, anxiety is somewhat paradoxical: it finds us in a way that's almost impossible to predict, yet there's a responsibility we can take to grow and change. Let's hope for some of that growth as we read Jesus' words on anxiety one last time (READ Lk 12:22-34).

So, we've covered a number of Jesus' teachings from this passage. We've talked about seeking God's kingdom must become our primary orientation in life (vs. 31). Last week, we discussed the need to change our thinking and perspective about life; that we need to focus on the transcendent rather than the things on earth (not a small task) - that's vs. 23. Jesus also told us about God's personal care for us (vs. 24 & 27-28); we don't have to worry or be afraid about the dangers and troubles because he will lovingly watch over us and provide our needs. There are two verses that I skipped over and reserved for today, vs. 25-26 which read, "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?"

The wording of this sentence is rather interesting. Jesus says, "and which of you *by being anxious* can add a single hour to his span of life?" Do you see what Jesus is implying about what we think and are doing with our anxiety? He's saying, "My beloved son, my beloved daughter, you think you're accomplishing something when you worry; you think it's producing something. You think your anxiety is at least, at a bare minimum, is preparing you for the worst so that if the worst happens you're at least not caught off guard. You're trying to add another day, another dollar, another friend or another something by your anxiety, but it's not working."

Do you see what Jesus is talking about? He's talking about control. We are plagued by anxiety because we wrongly think we can control more of the circumstances of life than we can. But an unpleasant truth we all need to acknowledge and embrace is that we have far less control than we think or than we would like.

Worry and anxiety are kind of funny in this way: by worrying and by being anxious about stuff we can't control, we're oftentimes distracted from the things we can do. Let me give you an example. Money is usually a pretty big source of anxiety; it's actually the context of Jesus' teaching like we've been talking about for weeks. Do you know what you're not in control of? You're not in control of how much things cost. You're not in control of unplanned medical expenses or increases to your health insurance. If the market goes south. If there are cutbacks at work. If your car decides to poop out on you. Financially, all of those things (and many more) can pose a problem for you and you're not in control of them. Do you know what you are in control of? You could reduce some of your spending. You could find a second job for a season. You could cut coupons. You could get creative with vacation planning and save some money there. There are things that you could do to help your financial situation. And here's what

happens: we let our anxiety about the stuff we can't control block or hinder us from doing the things that are within our control. So, one of the ways you could fight your anxiety is to tell yourself in the moment that your anxiety is actually hurting you and keeping you from doing the things you could do.

I'm going to reword Jesus' words in vs. 25-26 (Lord, have mercy!): *You can't add a single hour to your life. You don't have control over that or many other things. Why worry about stuff you can't control?* Anxiety goes up the more you think you have control in securing your life. Well, you don't. You don't have that control. Are you willing to admit that?

It's not hard seeing why we try to secure our life: this is a scary, broken, and harsh world. Life can chew you up and spit you out, am I right? It doesn't take much for you to discover the cruelty, the unpredictability of life. Just one diagnosis, one betrayal, one car crash, one premature death, one failure to unsettle you and cause you to feel like you are constantly adrift. Friends, this is a fact of life. This is what life is like on this earth while we wait for Jesus to take us home.

But here's the deal about anxiety: that's not the principle problem. It is a problem, but it's not a primary problem. A primary problem is that we expect it to be different. Somewhere over the last number of decades in the West as life expectancy increased, as wealth increased, as health and medical technology improved, and as creature comforts mutated from luxuries to necessities our expectations in life have become significantly unrealistic. I'll give you an example: Life ends as the Wipfs know it when... the water heater goes out. We have no idea how to survive without hot water. We'd soon become Pig Pen reincarnated before stepping into a shower with cold water. Can't handle it. But some of you remember that's all you had growing up. When I hear some of you tell stories how you'd take showers in the barn it makes me want to ask you what it was like to have Abraham Lincoln as your President. Are hot showers a necessity? For the Wipfs they sure are. But why? Because of our expectations. Should no hot water cause an anxiety disorder? No, but it might if you expect it.

Consider these questions: Who said life was going to be safe? Who said that you wouldn't struggle? That life would be easy and comfortable? Why are you surprised that life is difficult? Who told you that challenges are abnormal and recreation and comfort are normal? I would submit to you that we live in a culture that is wildly unrealistic with its expectations and with those unrealistic expectations comes anxieties. Since it's part of our culture, it's very likely that we've adopted some of those expectations.

Listen to Peter in 1 Peter 4:12, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." That's all about expectations. A fiery trial is coming upon you; don't be surprised when something like that happens as if something strange is taking place; the fiery trial is to be expected, so get ready. If you're ready and you've been expecting something like that, the chance of anxiety will be much less.

There are three responses we should have to this information. Let me run through them. First of all, adjust your expectations. You're able to deal with challenging situations, my brothers and sisters. You can deal with hard times. God's grace is enough for you; he has and will supply all that you need for life and godliness through the knowledge of him. But only if you get yourself ready; only if you've been prepared for them. That's all about expectations.

The best way to adjust your expectations is being in dialogue with the Bible and your brothers and sisters in faith. God's word maps out for you what you should think and what you should do. That issue of trials I just brought up is a perfect example as to why you need to do that. The Bible says we should expect trials; it something we should plan for and not be surprised by when they find us. If you read your Bible you'll know that and you will adjust your expectations accordingly.

The second course of action you should take is to look to God. While you're not in control of so much of what happens in the world, guess who is... God. The God of the universe, the God who loves you and cares for you is in control of everything that happens to you. And did you know that if you are a follower of Jesus, if you've been born again by his grace and through your ongoing repentance and faith in him, that nothing happens to you unless God lovingly permits it in your life so that you are more deeply and significantly conformed to the image of Jesus? Every time this world touches you with its chaos, its darkness, brokenness and trouble, God allowed it so you would become a more devoted worshiper of God. And, if I can remind you from last week's message, anxiety is one of God's cues to us that our eyes are off the kingdom.

The last response I want to mention to you comes straight from Jesus in vs. 32-34 from Luke 12 (READ). What Jesus is doing in these verses is giving us a more specific picture of what seeking God's kingdom looks like. Notice how the general picture Jesus is giving is a life lived for the blessing of others; Jesus is saying, "Stop looking at yourself in the mirror and your problems and issues and do some good to the people around you." Anxiety has a way of turning you in on yourself where all you think about is you and your troubles. But when you do that, when you're so focused on all your troubles, what are you going to get? Anxiety! Jesus is trying to help us with that by directly our attention and focus out.

I find this last paragraph so interesting; it's got almost everything. It has God's care for us (Fear not, little flock). He's helping us look to the needs of others rather than our own needs. He reminds us to look at eternity and not on earthly stuff. And finally, he reminds us that it's about our heart; it's about what you treasure and love and embrace.

As we wrap up these 3 weeks on anxiety, allow me to say this: chances are you're not going to be able to overcome these challenges without some help. Sometimes, just telling somebody about your struggles will free the logjam of worry and depression. Don't keep suffering alone.