

Keep your Lamp Burning: help for the anxious
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We live in a quick-fix culture. More and more, time has become a precious commodity and we've grown less patient in life to wait for the things we want. I'm certainly guilty of this; I like to go, go, go. Multiple times this past week as I've looked at all this snow I've prayed, "How long, O Lord? How long will wait for warmth, melting, sunshine?" But on a more serious note, when someone is dealing with difficulties like anxiety, you can hardly blame them for wanting a quick-fix.

I'm of the persuasion that there really isn't a quick-fix when it comes to anxiety and its close cousins like depression and panic attacks. There are exercises and techniques that we can practice that can help with our nerves or with panic; I also think that reminding ourselves of the truth of God's word in the moment can help put our mind at ease. But the real help to anxiety are not quick-fixes.

Do you know what that means? It means your interactions with anxiety are going to be a battle over time. It's going to be a war. You are going to have to make an effort and be persistent on a daily basis maybe year after year. You're going to have to be resolved to break bad habits and learn new ones. You're going to have to be honest with yourself and admit some of your thinking is wrong; so is some of your actions and behaviors. There is no other way. There is no magic bullet that fixes anxiety. There isn't a pill; there isn't a diet or exercise plan. Sure, those things can help and many of those things will be a part of your comprehensive plan against anxiety, there are no quick-fixes. Ultimately, anxiety is about your heart and soul. It's about what you treasure and care about. It's about your affections and what you've got your arms around. And that's religious, friends.

I know some of you are so tired and discouraged by your anxieties. You are worn down. I have some good news for you. First, God cares about you and your anxieties. That's why he has so much in the Bible about this topic. He knows we struggle with fear and anxiety and he wants to help. But also, you can do something about your anxiety. You're not a passive victim to anxiety; God is calling you to be an active warrior against the forces that press an anxious spirit in your life. The strength isn't found in you; the strength comes from God. But when you reorient your life around God's words and truth by faith, he supplies the strength to fight

We began our discussion on anxiety last week and I shared what I would consider the most important words from Jesus on this subject from Luke 12. If you didn't hear last week's message and you want to mature with respect to anxiety, last week's sermon is a must-hear. You won't find victory without incorporating that message into your life. Anxiety is about what you think and I shared some critically important, biblical truth in that message. So, let's read Jesus' words again and then apply them to our lives (READ Luke 12:22-34).

Last week, I tried to address the overall theme or direction Jesus was teaching his disciples to take. I skipped a lot of the details; I want to start looking at those details this morning. Jesus gives

some wonderful nuggets that we need to apply to our life that's seeking his kingdom so that we have the necessary tools in our toolbox to counter anxiety in our lives.

Jesus begins by saying, "Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on." Jesus' command is a rather radical one when you think about it. What's more important than where your food comes from or how you will find shelter? He's not telling us not to worry about our facebook profile or whether we get accepted in our college of choice; he's talking about the necessities of life. But Jesus words make sense when we remember what we learned last week: there's something more important than life and that's the kingdom of God.

Did you notice how Jesus *commanded* us not to be anxious? Don't do it, Jesus says. I bet that's what some of you husbands have said to your anxious wives. I would bet some of you moms and dads looks at your fearful, anxious children and told them, "Don't be afraid." Let me ask you a question: did that work very well? I bet it didn't help very much, right? Do you know why telling someone not to be anxious isn't very helpful? There's no power in it. Col. 2 tells us that there is no power in law, no power in the commands to stop or curb the temptations of the flesh.

Anxious people need to know why they shouldn't be anxious; they need to see and learn something else, something different that overcomes or alters the thing that is currently making them anxious. Commands don't do that. Now, you might say, "Well, Jesus said it." Right, but you're not Jesus and, more importantly, Jesus doesn't stop there; he doesn't give the command *don't be anxious* and then walk away. No, he gives reasons for us not to be anxious; that's what's coming now so let's look at what Jesus says. That where the real help comes from.

So, the first reason why Jesus says we shouldn't be anxious is in vs. 23, "For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing." I kind of hinted at this before, but that's not so obvious, especially when your definition of life only includes the things of the earth, the things pertaining to life on this rock and not what happens when you're not on it anymore. If this is all there is, if there's nothing more than what happens to us than our 80+ years on earth (and don't take *that* for granted) then life really is about food, clothing, and shelter among a few other things. You should worry and focus on this stuff because this is what matters most. But Jesus is pleading with us to believe that there's something more and better than this life. It's the kingdom.

You know, when you think about it, we forget this pretty quickly. Why do you think there are so many reminders in the scriptures to set your mind on things above? To look at your life and circumstances with the eyes of faith? Because we're spiritually forgetful. Because every single day we're tempted to think that what I can touch with these hands, see with these eyes, taste with my tongue is all there is. You and I must develop a habit of remembering that there is an eternity. There is a coming kingdom. There's something beyond this world that's more important than my life. And the more you remember that, the more victorious you will be against your anxiety.

In fact, our anxiety is a cue that our eyes are on the things of the earth instead of eternity. God has given us our emotions; our emotional responses are little windows into our soul. Our emotions are like diagnostic tools about what's happening in the interior of our life and soul. And anxiety says, "Brian, your eyes are off of Jesus. They're on worldly things. Your focus is wrong." And when I learn to read and understand that diagnostic, I can make the appropriate adjustments. I can repent and turn back to Jesus. Now, I'll say it again: I know what I speak of such things it sounds like it's so easy. Just do this and it will all be better. No, it doesn't work like that. Remember, we need a comprehensive plan against anxiety, but it starts here. It starts with what you look at and focus on. Pay attention to Jesus' clues for us.

Jesus moves onto another nugget in vs. 24; he says, "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse or barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" So, notice how the next way Jesus comforts and helps the anxious is by pointing them to the loving care of God. Look how God cares for a bird with all of its relative insignificance compared with you. If he'll take care of birds, certainly he will provide for you.

Jesus returns to this emphasis of care in vs. 27 and 28. He says, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!" That same emphasis is there in this passage from Jesus, too. Look how God takes such good care of the lilies; they look glorious and they are clothed! Certainly God will do the same for you!

Friends, I want to say it clearly and boldly: God cares for you. He knows about your needs and he will not spare his resources taking care of you. Your value is so far greater than the flowers in the fields; according to God you are more valuable than many birds. He will take care of you.

What does this care look like? Well, think of it this way: is it going to be earthly care or spiritual/kingdom/eternal care? Jesus is saying, "And all these things (meaning, food and clothing) will be added to you." That's earthly stuff, but to truly be confident in God's care, you still have to look with the eyes of faith.

I'm reminded of a story from missionary John G Paton (PIC). He did missions work in the South Pacific in the 19th century on the New Hebrides Islands among tribes that were ruthless, even cannibals. One night, as he writes in his autobiography, his life was in jeopardy as there were tribal wars. Some of his native friends feared for his life so they told him to hide in the jungle. He took their advice and climbed a tree and he began to pray. Listen to what he says about the care of God (READ pg. 200).

So, let me summarize what Jesus has told us today for help with anxiety. The first faith step to take is rethinking our life. Life is more than the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the people we interact with. There is a world, an existence beyond. When we get our eyes off of the kingdom that's coming and put it on this world and all of its troubles our anxiety will go up.

Secondly, we are helped with anxiety by remembering and believing God's care for us. He will provide for our needs. When the pressure begins to mount and we start feeling like we will soon be in lack (of food, money, acceptance, safety) we are to remember that God cares for us. He takes care of the birds and the flowers, he will take care of you.

Now, one last thing: notice the last 5 words of Jesus' command in vs. 28 - O you of little faith. Anxiety is about faith; it's about our beliefs and values and expectations. Now, I bet some of you hear that and feel guilty. You hear that and you feel criticized. You already feel guilty for not trusting God and your anxieties making life difficult for friends and families; maybe you even feel like this feels like rubbing it in. I get it. But I'm wondering if I can help you think and feel differently about that.

First of all, I think we hear Jesus' words and think he's wagging his finger in our face - like he thinks we are a big disappointment for being anxious. But what if that's not Jesus' heart? What if he saying, "O you of little faith" with compassion and empathy in his eyes and voice? What if he's the kind of loving friend, loving Master and Savior whose words are only uttered to help you? I hear Jesus say to me *O you of little faith* with tenderness in his voice trying to point me in the right direction. He's telling me, "Brian, I have help for you. Your anxiety is not primarily about your difficulties or troubles; it has to do with your faith. It's struggling right now, but I'm here to help." I do believe that's the heart of Jesus' words.

But secondly, when did having little faith become a shock? Who doesn't have little faith that needs to grow? Where did we learn that for us to be accepted by God and to be welcomed into the church we need to have our act together? That we have to be above the struggles of anxiety and other troubles that come because of our lack of faith?

Friends, I have little faith! I do. Your pastor. In fact, if some of you knew how small my faith was in certain areas of my life you'd wonder what I'm doing up here. We all have little faith. We all have areas we need to grow in. Now, let's make sure we are growing, but banish from your mind, my dear brothers and sisters, that you have to have your life and faith together. You might be discouraged to hear Jesus say to you, "O you of little faith." I hear Jesus say to you, "O you of little faith" and I think, "Hey! She's got faith! He's got faith! Jesus himself sees it and says it! It's not what it ought to be, but, hey, join the club. We all have a ways to go." Don't be discouraged that your faith needs to grow; that's true for all of us. Jesus loves you and is ready to help you.

Key vs: Luke 12:22

Questions for the week

- Is it encouraging or discouraging to hear that there are not quick-fixes to anxiety? How come?
- What are some things that might help you keep your eyes above the troubles of this world?
- What was the most important message you heard today to help you with your anxiety?