

Caution Ahead: When Anxiety Attacks

Luke 12:22-34

Introduction:

“Anxiety has become the number one health issue in North America. It’s estimated that one third of the North American adult population experiences anxiety unwellness issues.”¹

Life is full of irony. We’ve established and experience one of the most affluent times of prosperity ever in the history of the world, yet anxiety issues continue to grow in our culture. According to the *Economic Burden of Anxiety Disorders*, a study commissioned by the ADAA and based on data gathered by the association and published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, anxiety disorders cost the U.S. more than \$42 billion a year, almost one third of the \$148 billion total mental health bill for the U.S. Far from going down, this number continues to grow as more diagnosis and medications are handed out.

However, we do not need stats and figures to convince us that anxiety and worry is an issue for us. We all experience some sense of worry and anxiety and for some, this is a consuming and ongoing struggle. Think about the areas of life that we worry about:

- **Finances** – Will we have enough for: kids college and retirement?
- **Health** – How long will I live? How can I stay pain free?
- **Unknown** – What about the future? Of this country? The election? Market?
- **Relationships** – Salvation of some? Security of our kids? Marriage?

All of this causes pressure and is produced by a system that strives to 1) **Borrow trouble from tomorrow** (anxiety affects us today by living in the future of the unknown and uncontrollable), 2) **Borrow trouble from other** (Look what happened to them; I don’t want to go through that) and 3) **addresses worries we did not even know we had** (welcome to advertising 101 – I did not know I needed _____ or that my life was not complete without _____) We are made to be highly aware of what we call “1st world problems”, since these do not have to do with daily sustenance, but rather areas of health, safety, preference, and entertainment. Our culture informs us that we need more, never have enough, and have immense reason to be concerned or fearful of the future. Our culture feeds on our desire for more and for future security, offering both at the expense of our contentment and trust in God alone.

When we begin to give into cultural thinking, we are sucked into a world of fear and anxiety, especially because **we have much to lose**. When we look around and see all the things that are fearful, concerning, or that we lack, we can easily begin to worry. Worry and anxiety never stay in their box nor run between the rails, but cause us to be **depressed, risk adverse, self-absorbed, fearful, reactionary, unhappy or lacking joy, quick tempered**, and even causing **physical ailment**. It leaves us with a feeling that life is unsettled, overwhelmed, disconnected or detached from reality and life, and often on the edge of feeling out of control. All of this leaves us questioning God at some level since we feel a vast distance between what He says and how we feel.

Before wading into the text, we have to be clear on a few things.

1. **Anxiety is real** – Experience is not the only thing that informs us. Jesus deals with this subject because it is a very present struggle in this world and in the flesh. This also means there are no *easy fixes*, but possible changes rooted in the truth of Jesus Christ. This struggle is able to be changed, but will be a lifelong pursuit.

¹ <http://www.anxietycentre.com/anxiety-statistics-information.shtml>

2. **Science has not solved anything** – The medical world can offer drugs that inhibit neuro-receptors, bringing temporary relief from *symptoms*, but medication CANNOT ultimately solve the core issue of anxiety
3. **No amount of stuff is the solution** – It is clear that full bellies, clothed backs, and homes with roofs on them are not enough for us to be worry free. No amount of stuff will.
4. **The gospel is the ultimate antidote** – The gospel frees us from fear because it ultimately brings hope for the future and clarity in the present. This world is not our home anymore, and any kingdom we set up here is not our hope. WE have a living and secure hope of the future (1 Pet. 1:3-5), since we anticipate something better to come (Heb. 11:39-40). Our problem (my problem) is I am more earthbound than I'd like to think, I lack more faith than I like to admit, and I value my stuff more than my dependency on God.

How do we think rightly about God, ourselves, and this world so that worry does not control us, but the Spirit, that worry does not distract us, and does not drain our joy. This is exactly what Jesus addressed with His disciples who had left everything to follow Him.

The Context of Worry (12:21, 34)

Luke 12:21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God...

Luke 12:34 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

NOTE: These are bookend statements around the address of anxiety

- **Connection with Covetousness**

We may always connect anxiety with covetousness, but Jesus sure does. Notice that right after addressing the downfall of storing up treasure on earth out of a desire for self-leisure, He bridges the discussion to talk through anxiety (notice the word “therefore”, building a new discussion from the previous). It may not be obvious at first glance, but the leap is not exactly massive. Our never satisfied desire for things can easily create a lack of security in our heart. Kent Hughes said it this way:

“Worry is the emotional reward of material preoccupation.”² Where greed never can have enough, worry is afraid it may never have enough.

- **Tied to our Treasure**

Jumping to the end of the section, Jesus brings out that at center of worry is what we treasure, and what we treasure reveals our heart. Anxiety has to do with our mind (as we will see), but examining what makes us anxious is an examination of what we truly treasure. Covetousness reveals our **idols**, and anxiety reveals the same. *We are not only covetous of what we do not have, we are anxious about what will be taken away.* We have much to lose.

The Cause (and subsequent cure) for Worry (22-28)

Luke 12:22-28 And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.²³ **For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.**²⁴ **Consider** the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. **Of how much more value are you than the birds!**²⁵ And which of you by being **anxious** can add a single hour to his span of life?²⁶ If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you **anxious** about the rest?²⁷ **Consider** the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not

² Kent Hughes, “Luke, vol.2”, p. 51.

arrayed like one of these. ²⁸ 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!**

Worry stems primarily from two places: **ignorance** and **unbelief**. Jesus set out to not only address both, but in acknowledging these, actually gives the continual pathway out of worry. He first gave the command and the reason why we should not worry.

- **Real life matters**

Jesus said simply “do not be anxious”, which was an active imperative meaning “stop being continually anxious”. The areas of life we are not to be worried about are our **life**, particularly what we will eat, and **body**, what we should wear. Now in the context and culture, He was literally addressing those who were following Him from town to town, who had left jobs and home, and they were not to worry *even* about these basic necessities of life. Notice these things are typically NOT the source of our worries, but areas of life and body ARE. Think about how much of our worry is centered on these two areas, of things attached to life and our body. Jesus targeted these areas intentionally, knowing we can be absorbed here.

The overarching principle He gives: **life is more than these things**. Or to say it another way, *REAL life, eternal life* is more than these things. If all we have is this existence in this life, He could not have said this. But our life is not hidden here but in something future. And while we are here, our mission is far greater than simply existing. To only focus on sustaining our life and body, we not only take the place of God, we misunderstand the reason we are here.

- **How we think matters**

But Jesus did not simply give a command that tells us to “STOP IT” without filling in the blanks. He gives logical and rational reasons why worry and anxiety do not make sense. The nature of this is an argument from *lesser to greater* in order to inform our mind. Anxiety is a mental shortcoming, stemming from wrong thinking which causes us to act contrary to God’s will. He begins with the command to **consider, or observe** the way things work.

Worry is for the birds – The first observation was to look at the birds, particularly the ravens, or better stated, the crows. These were birds that were *unclean* in the OT (Lev. 11:13-15), were scavengers, thus did not plant, harvest, or store any food but depended on finding their food everyday. The point made was that **God actually fed the crows daily**, because He cares about them (this shows God’s greatness, because who cares about the crows!). The lesser to greater argument: **you have much greater value than birds!** What we must remember is that we are valuable to God, and though He is about His own glory, He remembers us and provides for us. He is not detached from everyday life, He is not slack in answering us, and is not unaware of our need. If He cares for daily needs of birds, He will undoubtedly care for us.

Worry does not add anything – The next logical point of observation is that of the effect of worry in our life. We spend time worrying about the future, but by nature worry CANNOT add value to our condition. In fact, excess worry can have the opposite effect on our life, causing our bodies to react negatively to the stress our mind puts on it. Again, in an argument from lesser to greater, if we cannot add one hour to the end of our future, why are we spending time worrying about everything else. Worry, by nature, cannot add anything positive to the future (NOTE: A large amount of discernment here: we must read the Bible in its complete context. This does not mean we do not plan or strategize for the future, just as it is not wrong to store up and save for the future. The point is not **doing** those things, the point is worrying about those things.

- **What we believe matters**

Worry ignores God's provision – Jesus again called His disciples to consider or observe the lilies or flowers that would grow wildly on the hillside (think the hills of Simi Valley after the rain – you know, those two weeks of green). These sprout up after the rain without anyone tilling the ground, sowing the seed, or watering afterward. They sprout up with the single purpose of bursting out with praise to the God who showers sun and rain down on weary and thirsty hills. WE are able to enjoy this spontaneous beauty in ways that no human can produce. Even Solomon, considered the highest rank in human achievement or wealth and wisdom, could not manufacture this type of beauty with all the resources of the world at his disposal. And also consider the green hills, which are here today and gone tomorrow, used as fuel for cooking stoves. If God so blankets the hillsides with a green jacket, snugly fitting every nook and crevice, He will much more take care of our body, what we will wear. In essence, Jesus is telling us to **stop and smell the flowers, to observe the natural course of life around us**, and consider how much more God values us. He not only cares for us in the realm of sustenance, He gives us beautiful things to enjoy. But all of this does not merely stay in our mind, because by nature, battling against anxiety is a **spiritual issue**, one that has at its core **faith and belief**.

Worry believes wrongly about God –

“O you of little faith”

Anxiety reveals what we really believe about God. Notice it's not a case if we believe there is a God, but what we actually believe about that God. If our view of God is anything less than what Scripture informs us, we create a God too small to deal with our worry, too distant to care about our condition, too inconsistent to handle the incongruities of life. So the battle of faith and anxiety has to do with certain attributes of God.

- 1) **Is God, by nature, a provider?** To say it another way, we are challenged to believe that God is sovereign, that He provides all things or not. There is no such thing as a sort of sovereign God. He is either supreme over all or not. We know that God not only created everything, but sustains all things, and does all things for His good pleasure (Col.1:15-17; Psalm 115:3)
- 2) **Is God good?** This is really the issue of our tension with God and His sovereignty. Is He good? Does He really do what's best for me? How do I reconcile the things that happen that cause me to suffer or have pain? If He is good, why would He ever cause/allow the possible negative things that I know may come? We need to think rightly here to believe rightly about God.

God is defined as being good – “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.” Nahum 1:7. Being good means it is His nature to be agreeable. He gives good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11), is good to those who wait for Him and seek Him (Lam. 3:25), and even does good to those who reject Him (Matt. 5:45).

God secures what cannot be taken away – If worry operates in the realm of the future, the future must be thought about and settled in our thinking. We spend far too much time with “**what if's**” rather than “what is sure”. In 1 Peter 1:3-5, Peter says we have been “**born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading**,” kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed **in the last time.**” Notice the words of security and power that are given to remind us of their surety. These are things that CANNOT BE TAKEN AWAY, yet we often take these for granted or worse take no notice of these things at all. Instead we wonder if we'll have enough money in

retirement or if we'll see old age. Instead of worrying about the future, our faith is built when we focus on what's secure about our future.

God refines what is most precious to Him – The passage that proceeds this is huge for our understanding of our inclination to worry. Here it is, in all its glory:

Peter 1:6-9 In this you **rejoice**, though now for a little while, as was **necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith**- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and **rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,** ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

- **Our faith is so precious, God is willing to refine it** – When God gives OR TAKES AWAY, this is by definition GOOD, because He is after something so precious He is willing to have us be **grieved for a time** to be joyful for an eternity
- **The trials we receive are for our joy and completeness** (James 1:2-4) – God gives to us uniquely because He knows us so well. These are not painful for pain sake, but are refining to make us more and more dependent on Him, increasing our faith and expanding our joy.
- **God does not give or take away because we have done wrong or that He's mad** – This is what Paul realized in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul asked God **3 times** to take away a thorn in his flesh, and three times God said no, so that Paul would know that God's grace is sufficient and His power perfected in His weakness. Paul was willing to say this because of his weakness and Christ's power, **"For the sake of Christ, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."**

When we are anxious, we fail to believe that God is good. We view Him as good when good happens, but when anything painful, sorrowful, or unexpected happens, we are not sure He is good, and that causes us to mistrust Him in the realm of the future. But when we rest on the fact that He is good, that He secures our future, and that He does everything to cause us to trust Him more deeply with a refined faith, our faith grows in the present and the certainty of the future.

The Course Away from Worry (29-31)

Luke 12:29-31 And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be **worried.** ³⁰ For all the nations of the world **seek** after these things, and **your Father knows that you need them.** ³¹ Instead, **seek** his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

• **Seek what is Distinct**

What does faith in worry look like? It looks like pursuit or seeking. Jesus used "seek" three times to command us to direct our thoughts and lives in the proper direction. When we worry about the secondary matters of life, we act very much "like the nations of the world". That is all they have. Our view toward our life and bodies in this world should reflect our belief that this world is not ultimate and life in this flesh is not forever. If we are to acknowledge Christ with our mouth we must also model it by what we hold tightly to in this world.

• **Seek what is Primary**

Two key understandings, then, of what we seek. 1) We seek the primary thing, which is the **kingdom** (and His righteousness as Jesus said in Matthew 6:33). The kingdom is future. It is secure because of salvation and it is our Father's good pleasure to give it to us. We seek the kingdom by seeking the

sphere of salvation where Christ rules as King and Lord. We seek His righteousness by not only living righteously but by calling others to do the same through repentance. 2.) When we seek His kingdom, the other things, the realities of sustenance, become clear. We have those things from the hand of God, but they do not define us, they do not mark us, and they are not our god. They serve as a means to a greater end and are no longer what we long for nor are we striving after. We have turned from the things of this world for value, joy, and happiness to that which is stored up later.

The Close Cousin of Worry (32-34)

Luke 12:32-34 "**Fear not**, little flock, for it is your **Father's good pleasure** to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. ³⁴ **For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.**

- **Fear and the Future**

As we've already stated, anxiety lives in the future realities that we cannot control, and is enhanced by the combining with fear. Fear believes or anticipates the worst, and does not simply think we will not have enough but is concerned with what we will lose. Our father desires to give us something good and sure in the future, and it is His delight to do so. The command to "fear not" is oft repeated in Scripture, and is one of the most common commands. We can now battle our fear of an unknown future because we have assurance that our real, lasting, and pleasurable future is secure.

- **Fear and the Present**

So what do we do with fear and anxiety in the present? How do we battle it daily? Jesus gave two commands. Sell all that you have and give it away to those in need. Is this hyperbole? Does He really mean this? To those following Him at the time, that was the reality. Much like the rich young ruler, holding back on wealth would have negated following Jesus on His path toward Jerusalem. For us, it is just as serious but more measured. It means that we keep an open hand with our possessions, both in **attitude and actuality**, both in the way we view what we have and what we do with it. Because we KNOW the reality of the future, we invest in the things that last into eternity, that cannot be burned up, and that cannot be destroyed. We have much to lose, but we must realize that we count all things loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

How do we battle fear and anxiety? By recognizing where the battleground is (our mind and heart), by using the proper weapons (truth of God's Word) by focusing on the things that are sure (promises of a secure future, future grace), and by seeing all things - both good and hard - as opportunities to refine what is most precious to God, our faith. We battle this together, over a lifetime, as we seek the True Reality of God and a future kingdom.

Questions to Discuss:

- **What are areas of life that you find yourself being anxious and fearful? What are the consequences of this?**
- **How does our culture/news/advertising feed into this? How does this cause us to buy into it?**
- **If worry has to do with thinking and faith, how do we properly battle this with the truth? What are sure things and future promises God has guaranteed?**
- **Why would God "take things away" in the present? Read 2 Cor. 12:1-10 - How did Paul learn to be content in the midst of calamity and hardships?**
- **How do we help each other in this battle?**