**Matthew 6:24-34**

**Coping with stress and worry**

It seems that whatever we do nowadays, we can’t escape from stress: life is stressful! In our homes, in our work, even in our leisure activities, we are put under stress that causes worry and anxiety. Stress, as we know, is the greatest debilitating illness in modern society: more work days are lost through stress than any other sickness and that’s not to mention the amount of fatalities that happen through stress-related illnesses.

And all this is rather ironic, really, give the technological advances in the last 50 to 60 years - all designed to reduce our stress levels. The dishwasher, the washing machine, the laptop, the mobile phone, the remote control: you name it – it was designed to reduce stress but seems to have the opposite effect, physiologically.

And we can’t be pious about it and pretend that Christians are exempt from stress just because we believe in a God who provides and meets us in our need. We worry just the same as everyone else.

And so we come to a passage like Matthew 6 and it speaks into the very heart of where most of us – perhaps all of us – are at. So let’s see what this passage has to say to us and how we can apply it to our lives.

And to start with, I want to consider what this passage does *not* say.

Now, this is an important point because before we think about what Jesus has to say about stress and anxiety, we need to be clear what he isn’t saying. And there’s two things that Jesus isn’t saying here…

First, Jesus is not saying that anxiety is a sin: anxiety, in and of itself, is not wrong. At no point in this passage does Jesus simply say, “Do not worry”. Twice he uses those words, but both times he qualifies them. First, in verse 25, Jesus says: “Do not worry about the food and the drink you need in order to stay alive”. Second, in verse 34, he says: “Do not worry about tomorrow.”

It is not worry and anxiety that Jesus condemns - only worry and anxiety about certain issues.

As we read through the New Testament, we see that people of God are no strangers to worry and anxiety. Paul was worried about the fate of the Galatian churches and how they were growing in the faith and he was anxious too for the fate of Titus when he arrived at Troas. In Philippians, we are told that Epaphroditus was so anxious for the church there that he left Paul and went to visit them. The Christians in the church at Corinth showed real anxiety about how best to serve the Lord. And one of the best-known passages about Jesus himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, paints a picture of a man under so much stress and anxiety that Luke tells us is sweat was like drops of blood.

So all this suggests that anxiety and worry, in and of itself, is not a sin. And when we come to realise that, some of the mental burden is lifted: we may still have anxiety and worry in our lives but we don’t need to feel guilty about worrying! It is not a sign of a lack of faith: it is just a sign that we care deeply about things and we want what is best…

So Jesus is not saying that anxiety and worry is a sin.

But the other side of the coin, is that Jesus is not saying that, in getting rid of anxiety and sin, we can become so laid back that we become irresponsible. Having faith is never blind and is not same as being irresponsible. And Jesus stresses this point in the passage because he says in verse 26: “Look at the birds: they do not sow seeds, gather a harvest and put it in barns; yet your Father in heaven looks after them!”

Now we may read this as saying, “Don’t worry – God’s got it all under control!” but you don’t need to be an ornithologist to know that birds actually work extremely hard! They make nests for themselves, they prepare for a hard winter, they get food in for their young, they don’t leave anything to chance. Birds are not irresponsible: they get their lives in order. But there is nothing to suggest that they are acting out of anxiety for the future but rather that they are following their natural instincts, for survival and a decent quality of life.

And I think that’s what Jesus expects us to do: not to be so anxious for ourselves that our lives become dictated by fear for our future security. But to behave like the birds: to be responsible in our behaviour and to plan ahead in a responsible manner.

So then, we can see first of all what Jesus isn’t saying: he is not saying that worry and anxiety, in and of themselves, are sinful - so we don’t need to feel guilty when we worry. And he’s not saying that Christian faith acts as an alternative for responsible behaviour: we need to be sensible about the future and not leave ourselves wide open to the cruel waves of fate that often threaten to overwhelm us.

So now we are able to come to the second point, which is to consider what it is that Jesus is saying here…

And in showing us how to combat worry and anxiety in our lives, Jesus teaches us two important principles here.

The first of these is honesty about our values in order to guard against false piety. We need to recognise the true importance of material things.

It’s easy for us to say as Christians: “Food, clothing, a place to live – these things aren’t really important: what really matters is the Kingdom of God”. But sometimes that can be a false piety arising out of the security of our situation.

So when Jesus talks here about anxiety, he’s not saying, “Don’t worry about food and clothing and the everyday things in life because the are unimportant” On the contrary, in verse 32, he says,

“Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things”.

These things – the basics of life – are important.

And part of our battle against anxiety is to recognise the importance of these things and to recognise also that God knows they are important to us and that he will give us our daily bread.

It’s interesting in this passage that, in verse 30, Jesus calls the disciples, “Men of little faith”. There’s only a few times when Jesus speaks to people like that: once when the disciples were afraid of drowning at sea, once when Peter was sinking in the water, and a third time when the disciples had forgotten what Christ provided for them in his miracle-working power. So each time the disciples are called “Men of little faith”, it’s because they haven’t taken to heart the presence, the promise and the power of the love of God.

And more often that not, we become anxious when we forget the presence, the promise and the power of God’s love in our lives. So whenever we do become anxious about things, the answer is never to resort to false piety and say, “Oh well, those things aren’t important anyway”. The answer is found in looking beyond ourselves, and even beyond the situation itself, to remember the promise of power, the promise of God’s presence and the love made available to us through Jesus Christ.

God is our Father. He is faithful in every way - and he knows how important the basic necessities of life are to us and, as Jesus says elsewhere, “Which father, if the child asks for a fish, will give him a snake?”

Our Father in heaven, who is faithful in every way, will give good things to those who ask him.

And there, perhaps, lies the second principle which Jesus shows us: that the battle against worry and anxiety in our lives has something to do with the perspective by which we view the events of life.

Perhaps the best known part of this passage is verse 33: “Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things.”

To seek the Kingdom of God is nothing less than accepting the Kingship, the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives: to submit to him, to hand over every area of our lives to him; our relationships, our job, our money, our church activities our hobbies, our housing arrangements, everything…

The Kingdom of God is not a place: its boundaries cannot be drawn on a map. The Kingdom of God is evident wherever an individual or a group of individuals in fellowship together come under the Lordship of Christ. The Kingdom of God is an attitude of heart, a pattern of behaviour, that is measured in humility and self-sacrifice, not square kilometres. And the realisation of that in our own hearts is the coming of the Kingdom of God.

That is a radical commitment that God expects, and even demands, of us if we wish to wear the label, ‘Christian’: a commitment that does not come easily to any of us because we all want to retain some element of control over our own lives. But the truth is that, as we learn over the period of our lives to truly hand all things over to God, to allow them to come within the scope of his kingdom, so we will be released from anxiety about those things.

It is not easy to say: “I am not anxious about my job: it is for the Lord to keep me employed or unemployed.” “I am not anxious about my mortgage: it is for the Lord to keep me this house or take it away.” Yes, to even get to the place where St. Paul was when he was able to say: “I am no longer anxious about my life: it is for the Lord to decide whether I live or die.” We do not say any of these things out of false piety. We are not saying that jobs or housing or even life itself are unimportant. Only that we surrender any right to self-determination: that we hand all things over to God and bring them within his Kingdom power.

And it’s only when we begin to get that perspective on our lives that anxiety will cease and the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God.

Because God is faithful and his faithfulness endures for ever and he will never let us down.

Jesus said, “Do not be anxious about your life…your heavenly Father knows that you need [all these things]. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

God is faithful - and his faithfulness endures for ever.

May we learn to rest in the faithfulness of God.