

Seek First the Kingdom

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus' instruction to "not be anxious" resonates with us. After all, we are fraught with fretfulness and worry. A recent study from the American Psychological Association predicts that the mental health crisis caused by Covid "could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come."

The Meaning of "Being Anxious"

In light of our struggles with anxiety, it is tempting to view Jesus' instruction as therapy for the anxious soul. But in fact, anxiety (as we understand it) is *not* really the main thing Jesus has in view. The word Jesus used for "being anxious" is a rather neutral word, and it carries a *positive* connotation in a couple places in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 7:32 and Philippians 2:20).

What Jesus means by "being anxious" may also be seen from the context: it is virtually synonymous with "seeking" in verse 32: "For the Gentiles *seek* after all these things." Try replacing "be anxious" with "be captivated by" or to be "be absorbed in," and it will give you a fuller sense of what Jesus meant. Rather than telling us to stop worrying, he is telling us what is *really* worth occupying our affections and energy: the kingdom of God and his righteousness. The problem is not so much worrying as it is *disordered priorities*, so the solution is not so much freedom from worry (worry is just a symptom) as it is *reordering* those priorities.

The Cure for Disordered Priorities

Now that we know that Jesus is seeking to reorient our priorities, we are better prepared to understand his argument in 6:25-34. Notice that each time Jesus forbids being anxious (read: disordered priorities), he also says, "therefore." That is, he presents three reasons to not be obsessed with other things.

1. There is a treasure that will not fade (6:19-24).

Recall that Jesus has presented two kinds of treasure: one that is subject to natural and human loss, the other that is "in heaven." He assumes that kingdom citizens are treasuring what is truly valuable. In view of this unfading treasure, Jesus can expect his followers not to be obsessed with things that will not last.

2. There is a Father who provides and knows (6:25-32)

Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater when he points out God's care for birds and even grass. "Aren't you much more valuable than they are?" he asks. The inescapable conclusion is that God has made it *his* concern to provide for the needs of his children, so his children are free to pursue what is truly valuable.

3. There is a kingdom that may be received (6:33-34).

Finally, Jesus exhorts his followers to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (6:33). It is critical to understand that Jesus is not telling us how to *get into* the kingdom, but how to *live* in the kingdom. In other words, seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness is allowing eternal priorities—the glory of God and the advance of his righteous reign—to govern our earthly lives. When we wake up in the morning, the thing on our mind is not, "How can I *survive* today?" but "how can I bring glory to the all-glorious One today?"

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. What misunderstandings might result from seeing this passage as being mostly about anxiety?
2. What attributes of God does Jesus highlight, and why are these so important for us to meditate upon?
3. Why does Jesus call his followers “you of little faith,” and what solution does he offer to remedy this problem?
4. What priorities do we tend to have that overshadow and crowd out “seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness?”