

OVERCOMING ANXIETY AND WORRY
Christ's Keys for Successful Living
Matthew 6:19-34
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We're looking today at Matthew 6:19-34 – Jesus teaching us how to overcome anxiety and worry.

I know what it is like to be full of anxiety and worry. Early on in my ministry I had a real problem in this area. At that time I was both campus pastor and spiritual life director at Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri, a Christian Liberal Arts college. The middle of the spring semesters became a very difficult time for me because that was the time when if anything was going to go wrong on campus it went wrong. Students under the pressure of term papers and exams would often resort to parties and pranks. I felt it was my personal responsibility to keep order on campus. After all, wasn't I responsible for the spiritual life and the student life? Just getting ready for the spring began to get me nervous.

By the time late spring semester had come I was a real basket case. I am a person who all my life has found it rather easy to go to sleep. Then it would be very difficult to get to sleep. This one year something very different and unusual happened. The only way I have to describe what happened is to describe it to compare it to sunburn. I am, like many redheads, sensitive to the sun. I have been seriously sunburned 3 times in my life when I was stupid enough to get out in the sun without protection. Once when I was 10, once when I was 20, once when I was 30. Then I got smart by the time I was 40. It didn't happen 4 times. Three times I'd been out in the sun a half hour and wound up under doctor's care so severely sunburned that it felt like a million pin pricks. Someone taking pins and jammed them all over your skin. My legs and arms and back broke out in this same kind of manifestation only I hadn't been sunburned. I'd had a nerve attack. I thought to myself, how can this be? I'm only in my early 20s. I'm already unable to handle stress and pressure. How can I ever continue in any kind of a job that involved people problems if I'm going to take them so internally?

One night it got so bad about 3:30 in the morning I was doubled up in pain. I couldn't stand up straight. I kind of crept out of the door of the house in the early hours of the morning down to the medical center and pleaded with them in the emergency room to give me a shot. I'd take anything to that particular point! Fortunately they had something to give me that took care of it that night. But it kept coming back.

Meantime I had started studying this particular passage of scripture, Matthew 6:19-34, and began to look at the principles the Lord was giving for overcoming anxiety and worry. In the process of trying to internalize what the Lord was saying one night my nerves began to go again and I could sense it coming and I was having a difficult time getting to sleep. I did something I don't know to this day how to explain. I just simply said to the Lord out of sheer sense of desperation and frustration. "Lord, I have wrestled with this problem all day. I need to get to sleep. This is your problem anyway and not mine. So I'm turning it over to you. I'm going to sleep. Good night. You worry about it a while."

Miracle of miracles I promptly fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning it was a different situation. I found myself healed of this nervous anxiety and only one time in the years after that

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have I had an attack like that on a similar fashion. That was once after I'd given a testimony on being healed interestingly enough.

Over the years I have faced far greater pressures than the ones I faced on that college campus. It has been this section of teaching on the Sermon on the Mount that has given me a mental mindset to keep the healing and not revert to the behavior or thought patterns which almost ended whatever ministry I could have had. I share this testimony at the beginning to simply let you know that today I'm not going to give you theoretical counsel on anxiety and worry. I know what the Lord says works and is a profit in our life.

Through Matthew 6 we have Jesus talking about our relationship with the Father. All security flows out of that relationship. The first half of chapter 6, the first 18 verses, speak of our personal disciples as they're lived out in the presence of the Father. Then here in these verses 19-34 Jesus gives us four steps in dealing with anxiety and worry.

First thing Jesus tells us is we must hold lightly earthly things and hold tightly eternal things. Verses 19-21. *“Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”*

An earthly thing is whatever is external to us. Jesus speaks of it as something, which is subject to deterioration. Moth, rust theft. These are the three things by which the externalities of life are lost to us. Jesus' choice of these terms – moth, rust, thief – give us an idea of where people place their treasure in his day.

Moth referred to the idea that some persons' treasure was in their clothing. The oriental could have very luxurious clothing which would be for them as significant as perhaps having a very large bank account is for us. Jesus says that clothing which is your treasure can deteriorate very rapidly. It is subject to the infestation of moth.

Second form of treasure was in storage of farm crops. Luke 12 Jesus gives us the picture of the man who had all kinds of things. Rather than doing anything for anybody else he said I'll tear down the present barns, build bigger ones and I'll store my crops in them.

Jesus talks about rust. The actual word that is used for rust is the word “eats a way.” It's a term which can refer to rust on metal but it also can refer to the ravaging that comes with stored up crops. Rats and mice that come in and infests the product and eats a way at them.

A third kind of treasure is what a person stored in a strong box in their home. The days before bank accounts and banks and safety deposit boxes and a person had valuables, metals, coins, jewelry they stored it in a box. But their homes were made out of stone or mortar or mud and brick and the thief literally to get to the treasure all he had to do was dig through the house.

The Lord said therefore in regard to the treasure of his time, if your treasure is in your clothing, if it's in your crops, if it's stored a way in a strongbox in your house it's not laid up for eternity. Don't put your priorities there. Since we can take nothing material into heaven our priorities in life must not be on the external.

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My security in the days of my nervous attack was bound up with my job. If I kept my job I had a future. But if I were dismissed from my job because I could not keep order on campus then I said to myself I had no value as a person. My treasure was in my work and yet my work was external to me. I could not take being campus pastor into heaven with me. I needed therefore to hold it lightly in my hands and if God wanted to take it, let him take it. It's not the end of the world and it's not the end of me. My trust must not be in the work; it must be in my Lord.

How tightly do you hold on to things that you can never take into eternity? How about easing up your grip and letting go? What are you concerned about today that won't really matter a hundred years from now or even a year from now? Hold those things lightly.

As much as I love you, this church, the honor and position that you and God have accorded me, my worth is not found in the fact that I am pastor of Newport Mesa Christian Center. My worth is in the fact that I am God's child. Your worth is not found in whatever you do. It's found in your relationship with the Father. I'll not take the role of pastor into heaven. There's only one pastor there. He's the chief shepherd of the sheep so pastors aren't needed. I can't take that. I can't take a new building into heaven. I can take family, friends, those of you dear to me into God's presence. I want to put my values and priorities there. Everything else is external.

We can't take it with us so we might as well hold on to it lightly.

A second principle that's given by Jesus for overcoming anxiety and worry is that we keep a clear outlook on life. Verses 22-23. *"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness how great is that darkness."*

Anyone who wears glasses knows that if they get dirty you don't see clearly. You've got to keep them clean to see clearly. Jesus is saying that's what the function of the eye is the body. If the eyesight is clean then the whole body is clear. You get a wrong outlook then the whole body is full of darkness. How do you get a clear outlook on life?

The words of Jesus here actually give us a clue. The phrase in the NIV says *"If your eyes are good."* The King James translates this phrase, *"If your eye is single."* Both the words "good" and "single" don't quite express what may be involved because the root which stands behind this English word is a word which means "generous." Wherever it's used elsewhere in the New Testament it means generous. It's just as fair to translate this passage as *"If your eye is generous your whole body will be full of light."*

To Jesus good eyesight is one that sees the needs of others and acts generously to meet those needs. Bad eyesight is the eyesight, which sees one's own needs and selfishly pursues them. Good eyesight is looking out for other's concerns and not looking at life from this jaundiced critical point of view of always finding fault with what someone else is doing. But instead giving them benefits of doubt. Giving not only of oneself in terms of financial matters but giving of one's heart in terms of a spirit of generosity. Jesus says when you get all clutched up living for yourself alone you will be full of darkness.

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When I am only concerned about the things, which happen to me and my four, and no more, then I do not have God's insight and God's ways. You may be involved in a relationship, which is bringing you a lot of stress and anxiety. "If he/she would only change and start thinking of me and meeting my needs it'd be great." But if your goal is to only have your own needs met then you live in psychological and spiritual darkness. The only person who receives love is the person who gives it. The only way to get it is to give it. The Lord says let your eyesight be generous. A way of dealing with anxiety and stress so we don't just get locked up with our own internal world.

The third principle given by Jesus for overcoming anxiety and worry is that we do not let money get in the driver's seat of our life. Verse 24 "*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*" Jesus tells us we cannot be a slave to money. He does not tell us we *should not*. He tells us we *cannot* be a slave to money. The word for "money" in the older translations is the word "mammon."

Mammon was the word the Jews used to describe deposits. Something they had entrusted to someone. In the days before financial institutions where people could deposit their stuff in a secure place, if a person were going on a journey he would leave his secure things in the hands of someone else. That was mammon. It was literally that which was entrusted.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how this word changes over the course of time from being that which is entrusted to that *in which your trust*. There's a tremendous degree of difference between entrusting something to someone and trusting in something. People do more than entrust their money to a bank or an investment. They trust in their money for security and well being and lifestyle. Jesus says you cannot serve both mammon and God. You cannot put your trust in one and at the same time put your trust in the other. You will have divided loyalty.

Money gets in the driver's seat in so many ways. It can happen when we get into debt. I do not refer to a debt, which is amortized rightly and is secured by proper investment or the like. I refer to the kind of debt where we try to keep ourselves going in a lifestyle which erodes our time that we have to give to family, to God, to the church and to other people and volunteer effort. Just simply giving of our time we're so busy chasing the American dream to have everything we can have that we will mortgage our soul to get it. Money gets in the driver's seat when we attain that kind of lifestyle.

One of the real cancers on the body of Christ today is the busyness of people pursuing a lifestyle that legitimate needs even within the body in terms of volunteer effort get neglected because we do not simply have time. Jesus tells us don't let money get in the driver's seat. Let him determine how you spend your time, not your debt.

God is really only concerned with two things about money how you get it and how you spend it. Only two things. He is concerned that you get it honestly. He is concerned that you spend it, invest it and give it wisely. If you don't spend it by letting him be Lord of it then you serve it rather than him.

Mammon may not necessarily be money. Mammon can be anything other than God in which you put your trust. When my trust was in holding my job my nerves went wild. When I came to

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the point of saying, “God, I’ll do what I can do. You have to do the rest. I can’t do any more.” God brought peace.

A fourth principle for overcoming worry and anxiety is our emotions must be taught to obey what Jesus teaches.

Verses 25-34. The strong presence of worry and anxiety in our life indicate that negative and harmful feelings have taken the governing role. We become ruled by those emotions. How do we deal with strong emotions like anxiety and worry? Jesus gives us some logical thought steps to take in reordering our whole thought processes. He is really telling us in this segment, 25-34, that our rational side must take away control from our emotional side. That our thinking must control our feeling. That what we believe must control how we behave.

That’s not easy. It’s not an easy transition to make if you are a person dominated by strong emotions and someone comes along and says, Get your mind in control and start thinking logically and rationally. But you say, “My whole problem is my emotions and I can’t think rationally and logically.”

I was so upset with Jesus when I was going through my nerve problems. I said, “Lord, you’re no help at all! My problem is my emotions are going wild and you’re telling me start thinking certain things. I don’t need something for my *thinks*. I need something for my *feelings*.” Yet the Lord was very clearly teaching me in this passage of scripture that it is the reordering of our thinking that makes it possible for us to get freedom on the emotional level. I must retrain my emotions to be subject to his Lordship.

As we look at this there are 7 particular steps – we’ll look at them quickly – for putting the rational side of us in control of the emotional side.

He first of all teaches us that life itself is more important than the things needed to sustain it. Verse 25 “*Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food and the body more important than clothes.*” Very simply what the Lord is doing is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If I have given you life won’t I give you the things needed to sustain it. The lesser things – food and clothing. If I’ve given you the greater, will I not take care of the less?

Secondly he points us to the example of the birds. “*Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they.*” The birds do work by the way. The Lord is not just encouraging a set-around attitude. Birds go to work getting seed, getting worms. They don’t just stay on telephone wires and God drops the seed and worms in their mouth. They do something about it. But the point of Jesus is here is they don’t store it up. They don’t get anxious about the future. He is again saying to us that if God in his process of creation takes care of the lesser of his creations, his creatures, will he not take care of you, the greater?

Third, the Lord shows us the complete futility of worry. Verse 27 “*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life.*” But it’s fun, Lord, to worry! Are you trying to take away all pleasure from us? The Lord says it doesn’t do any good to worry. You may enjoy it. Find perverse delight in it. But it has no productive purpose. I would distinguish worry from

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planning. Worry from legitimate concerns we're talking about negative emotion when we say worry or strong anxiety. Jesus says it doesn't prolong your life. King James says, "*It doesn't add a cubit to your stature.*" The idea is it doesn't add length probably it means to the span of life rather than the height of body. Worry serves no positive purpose. It doesn't prolong your life. If anything it'll probably shorten it. It produces stress and that produces heart attacks.

Fourth, the Lord points us to the flowers of the field as another example against worry. "*Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all of his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field which is here today and tomorrow is throw into the fire will he not much more cloth you, O you of little faith. So do not worry saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear?*" The Lord is saying the lilies are alive today. Tomorrow they are thrown into the oven. What kind of comfort is that? The comfort is this, for existing for so short time God clothes the lilies with such beauty. If he will take such care to adorn a flower which exists for a day will he not take care to adorn you who exists for eternity? Again, the argument from the greater to the lesser.

Fifth, the Lord says getting our emotional side underneath our rational side it is the pagans, that is those, who do not know God, who worry. Verse 31-32 "*For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows you need them.*" We are children of the Father. We know that he has our needs and promises to meet them. I know that God will always meet my needs. He may not meet my needs in the way I thought he would but he will always meet our needs. I am not an orphan and you are not an orphan left to fate or chance. We are children of God in whom God is always working for good.

The sixth step Jesus gives us putting our thought life in control over our emotions is to seek first his kingdom. "*Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well.*" The Lord is saying when you own concern is upon your welfare rather than centering first upon God's concerns then things get out of balance. He told us this already where the Lord's prayer where the first 3 petitions of that prayer focus upon God's concerns. Then we can begin praying rightly for ourselves, the last 3 petitions. The Lord is saying focus upon where God's heart is for your life rather than where you immediate demands and concerns are. Release it to the Lord and let him have his will. And all these things will be added to you.

There are those in the body of Christ today who say, this verse reads something like this: seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything will be added to you. That implies, claim that Jesus is Lord. Stand in a place of faith where you claim that he is the owner of everything and then watch God add everything to you and give you surplus and bounty beyond your wildest dreams and expectations. But Jesus does not say everything shall be added to you. He says, "*Seek first and these things shall be added to you.*"

What is the "these things"? It's the *these things* he's been talking about in the passage. The concern, Will I have enough to wear? Will I have something to eat? Will I have anywhere to sleep at night? The basic substance of life. The Lord is saying, sure! I'm going to take care of those basic elementary needs of life. You'll have something to eat. You'll have something to wear. You'll have some place to lay your head. Trust me. And God provides his body as the place where that can happen when people get in trouble.

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Seek first, God will take care of you. Don't worry about your life. Don't be anxious about what you're going to eat, wear, live.

The seventh step that Jesus gives us in putting our logic in control of our emotions is to live one day at a time. *"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."* Imagine for a moment that all your troubles and pressures of life could be represented in the form of boulders and rocks which were strewn over the field of your life. You're at a vantage point where you can see every one of them. There's just a huge amount of problems that are there for you to look at. Suppose that you have in your hands a burlap sack and inside you can put those rocks and boulders, which represent your pressures and trials. You'll have enough strength to carry the pressures and the trials that are along today's path, whatever distance you can travel today, you can pick up the rocks today and God has the strength for you to carry that sack. But if you try to run ahead down the road and get into tomorrow's boulders and tomorrow's rocks and next week's and next month's and next year's you'll find there are too many rocks and you can't lift that big a load. You can't do it.

Am I saying we shouldn't think or plan about tomorrow? No. We should only take that dimension of tomorrow's problem, which is within today's power to deal with. If I'm planning for something that lies off 6 months, maybe I need to do something today to get ready for it. But I only ought to do what I can do today about that. I should let the 6 months wait. The Lord's saying today is enough for today. I can't pick up tomorrow's rocks and boulders. I just can take today's.

You say, I came in to listen to your message worried and anxious. And after listening to your message I am really worried and anxious. You've thrown so much at me I'm now anxious thinking about thinking I can't now satisfy or please the Lord. I've got too much information. I'm overloaded.

Think this way. It takes time for a big ocean liner to turn around in the ocean. It's not like a little rowboat. It takes a wide sweeping turn and involves some time. So oftentimes we think when we need to change, I've got to change *today*. It's got to happen today. I've got to be healed today. That may happen. In God's grace it could happen today. But often what we have God does something instant but he also connects it to a process so it's a wide sweeping turn. So rather than having you go out of this service anxious and worried about Jesus' teaching on anxiety and worry, I say go out and if you don't do anything but begin to put the breaks on to make that wide sweeping turn then take this as an encouragement. The Lord says there's some processes to get hold of. Begin working on them. Engraft that into your life. You can live dealing successfully with anxiety and worry. Don't put tomorrow's trouble into today.

And by the way, don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today. If you're without the Lord then tomorrow's not the day of salvation. Today is. If there's anger and resentment and bitterness in your life tomorrow's not the way to deal with that. Today's the day to deal with that. We ought to deal with the things today that deal with today and the things of tomorrow, leave till tomorrow. And let God do something very special in our lives.

Take these words from the Lord and ask him to renew your heart and life. Peter says, *"Cast all your care upon him for he cares for you."*

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Our Father, we thank you for these moments we have shared together in your presence, setting under your teaching as our Lord. There are persons here today who are greatly wrestling with anxiety and worry. It may have to do with their future. Perhaps their work situation or financial situation. Others are involved in relationships, which have brought them a great amount of stress and anxiety. They're wondering how in the world could you work in this situation. It's so hopeless and things are so confused. But Lord in the quiet of our hearts let us know that you are God. Let us trust in you. Bring your peace. Move the cloud of your peace into this day. Do something very special in our lives that frees us to live as a child of yours. Overcoming the stress and anxiety and worry that God with being a person living in this time and instead finding our rest and strength and being in you. We turn our eyes upon you, Lord. We gaze into your face. You give us back peace. Minister your healing to every person present who struggles with anxiety and worry. We cast our cares upon you. In the name of the Lord. Amen.