

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 22, 2009**

WINNING THE WAR AGAINST WORRY

Matthew 6:25-34

“First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” I’m speaking, of course, of George Washington, the “Father of our country” and first President of the United States who was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia, 277 years ago today, on February 22, 1732.

Last Sunday, we took note of the bicentennial of the birth of our 16th President – “the Great Emancipator,” Abraham Lincoln – and the role he played in freeing the slaves and preserving the Union. But we said last week that, while Lincoln was the Great Emancipator, Jesus is the Greater Emancipator. He came to set people free – free from the enslaving power of sin and guilt, free from captivity to the demands and requirements of the law as the way to gain acceptance and favor with God, and free from our bondage to the enslaving power of fear. Jesus is the Greater Emancipator.

One of the things that holds many people captive today is worry. Are you a worrier? Maybe worry is not a problem for you. Maybe you have never had an anxious thought in your life. Maybe you have never lost a moment’s sleep worrying about what the future might hold for you or those you love. If that is true in your life, praise God! Give thanks to God. You probably don’t need to hear this message.

But if you are part of the 99.99 percent of people who struggle with worry – maybe occasionally, maybe constantly – I pray that God will speak to your heart through this message today. The reality is that for many of us – most of us – worry is part of the baggage of our lives. It is something we carry with us wherever we go. And we don’t have any trouble finding something to worry about.

Parents, for example, are prone to worry about their children. It is something that just seems to come naturally. We worry about their safety. We worry about their health and well-being. We worry about their grades. We may worry about their friends or the temptations they may encounter. We may worry about their spiritual growth or the condition of their hearts. We may worry about some of the choices they have made, or the choices they may make.

Children, especially adult children, have a tendency to worry about their parents, particularly as their parents enter the twilight years of life and experience declining health. Some of you know what I mean.

You may worry about the economy in these uncertain times, and its effect on you or those you love. You may worry about the possibility of losing your home. With the steep decline of the stock markets, you may worry about how you will ever be able to retire. Or, if you are retired, how you will be able to make it, given the hit you’ve taken in your 401(k).

You may worry about your job security. Or, if you are unemployed, when (or whether) you will find a job and how you will make it until then. These are not easy times. In fact, if Tom Paine were alive today, he might well say that, like the era of the American Revolution, these are the times that try men's souls.

You may worry about cancer or some other life-threatening illness.

In a dangerous and volatile world, you may worry about a terrorist attack or what might happen if certain groups or nations develop a nuclear arsenal.

You may worry that you will fail a test in school. Or a project at work. Or a relationship.

You may worry about what other people think of you. You may live in constant fear of being criticized or rejected by others. Someone once observed that we shouldn't worry so much about what other people think of us, because most of the time they don't (!).

Proverbs 12:25 says that an anxious heart – a heart full of worry – weighs a person down. Life is full of unknowns. There is no shortage of things that can weigh our hearts down with worry. So, if you find yourself plagued by worry, if you are weighed down with anxious thoughts, know that you are not alone. You have plenty of company. But I want you to know today that, with God's help, you can win the war against worry.

A well-meaning church published this public-service announcement: "Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help."

I don't think it came out quite the way they intended it. Worry *can* kill you. If not literally, it can kill your spirit. It can rob you of peace. It can weigh you down with burdens God does not intend for you to carry. It can stifle your faith. It can take over your soul.

Worry can kill you. But the church can help. Not help kill you (!), but help you win the war against worry. God's people can help. We can help one another. God's Word can help us, if we take it to heart and apply it to our lives. God's Spirit can help, as we allow Him to reign in us and to change us from the inside out by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).

The Lord Jesus has something to say to us today about worry. God has a message for us in His Word. And it is a message that can set us free.

WHAT JESUS SAYS ABOUT WORRY

Did you catch what Jesus has to say about worry in this passage from Matthew 6? Not once, not twice, but three times – in verse 25, in verse 31, and again in verse 34 – He says: "Do not worry."

Why did He have to say it three times, I wonder?

In the (old) King James Version of the Bible, it says something like this: “Take no thought for tomorrow, what you will eat or what you will drink.”

R. C. Sproul says his father used to quote this verse all the time. Yet, Sproul noticed that his father did take thought for the future. He bought life insurance. He bought health insurance. He bought fire insurance. He put money in a savings account.

Was he being inconsistent? Was he preaching one thing and practicing the opposite? No. As Sproul says, his father understood that what Jesus was teaching was not a prohibition against prudence but an admonition against the anxiety that robs us of our trust in the good providence of God.

Jesus is not telling us not to think. On the contrary. He urges us to think things through and to take hold of the truth by looking at the birds and the flowers and considering how God provides for them.

He does not tell us to check our minds at the door and to let our feelings, rather than our understanding, be our guide.

And He is not telling us not to think about the future. Jesus does not say that planning for the future is bad. Planning for the future is time well-spent. But worrying about the future is time wasted. He does not say: “Do not plan for the future. Just go with the flow and see what happens.” No. What He says is: “Do not worry about the future.” We are not to worry about what tomorrow (or next week or next year) may bring. He tells us not to be preoccupied with anxious thoughts about what Charles Spurgeon called “the world’s trinity of cares” – what to eat, what to drink, and what to wear. Or anything else.

To bring the point home, Jesus uses an object lesson. He points to the birds of the air, which are carefree in the care of God, and to the flowers of the field, which are stunning in their beauty. If God cares so much for them – and He does, Jesus says – can’t you count on Him to care for you and provide for you? Even when you’re going through a challenging time in your life? Like right now, maybe.

REASONS NOT TO WORRY

If worry is something that just seems to come naturally to us, if it is something at which many of us are really good, why does Jesus tell us not to do it? For several reasons.

First, worry simply doesn’t do any good. None. It cannot add a single day to your life, or even an hour. In fact, even if it doesn’t kill you, it may shorten your life. It won’t add a single hair to your head, although it may cause some of us to lose some of our hair, or at least cause it to change color! Unless it is an ulcer you’re trying to produce, or maybe a heart attack, worry is terribly unproductive. It is a waste of time and energy.

Someone said that worry is like a rocking chair – it gives you something to do but it doesn’t get you anywhere. It doesn’t solve a single problem. It doesn’t do any good.

Second, worry is irrational. It doesn't make any sense. A former major league baseball player – I think he played before the “steroid era” – made this profound statement: “Ain't no sense worrying about things you got control over, 'cause if you got control over them, ain't no sense worrying. And there ain't no sense worrying about things you got no control over, 'cause if you got no control over them, ain't no sense worrying about them.”

The language is different, but what he says agrees with what Jesus says. What are you more likely to worry about: things you think are in your control, or things over which you've got no control? Either way, it doesn't make any sense, because your Father in heaven knows what you need (Matthew 6:8, 32) and it is all under His control.

A third reason not to worry comes from the word “worry” itself. It comes from a word in both German and Old English which means “to choke” or “to strangle.” Ditto for the Latin word which is the root of our word “anxiety.” It also means “to choke.”

Isn't that what worry can do to you? Isn't that what it can do to your faith or to your joy? It can choke, it can strangle, it can suffocate your soul. It can rob you of the peace of God in your life.

Oswald Chambers said that worry is like a mosquito that irritates our whole life and keeps us from resting in God. You know how irritating mosquitoes or gnats can be. Worry is like that.

Or maybe you can identify with this picture. A successful businessman said: “Trying to break away from my worries was like wrestling an octopus.” Have you ever tried to wrestle an octopus? Not I. And I hope I never do, because it seems to me that with all those arms and legs, the octopus would have a huge advantage.

Whether it is a mosquito or an octopus, worry robs us of the peace and joy of the Lord. Corrie Ten Boom once said: “Worry doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.”

There is another place where Jesus talks about the soul-strangling effects of worry. One of the parables He told was about a farmer who scattered seed on different kinds of soil (Mark 4:1-20). Some fell on the path and was gobbled up by the birds. Some fell among the rocks where there was little soil. It sprouted quickly but withered just as quickly, because it didn't put down roots. Some fell among the thorns and weeds, which strangled the good plants so that nothing came of them. And some fell on good soil, producing a harvest beyond the farmer's wildest dreams.

But let's go back a moment to the seed that fell among the thorns. Explaining the parable to His disciples, Jesus said that some people, like the seed cast in the weeds, hear the message of the gospel, “but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word” (4:19). Peterson says in *The Message* that they “hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it.”

What is it that “chokes” the message of God’s Word and prevents it from being effective in the lives of many people?

- The worries of this life – all the things we worry about and allow to weigh down our hearts
- The deceitfulness of wealth – the lie of the devil that material wealth is the key to happiness
- The desire for more and more things

Watch out for what worry can do to you. It can sap your strength and strangle your soul.

The fourth reason not to worry is really the most important. Not only is it unproductive and irrational, not only can it choke your spirit and rob you of God’s peace, it is unworthy of a Christian because it betrays a lack of faith in God. As John Stott says, worry is incompatible with faith in Christ.

When we allow anxiety to take up lodging in our spirits, when we give in to worry, whether we realize it or not, we’re saying that we’re not sure God is able to handle the situation or problem we’re facing. We’re saying that this situation may be too big for God. Or that maybe God is too busy, too preoccupied with other things to be attentive to our need.

This kind of thinking is not worthy of a follower of Christ. It exposes a deficiency in our faith, because it reflects a defective view of God. It fails to appreciate and appropriate the sovereignty and sufficiency of God.

The sovereignty of God means that God is in control. It means that He is in charge. Everywhere. All the time. It means that “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” Do you believe that? It means that there is nothing too big and nothing too little for Him.

The sufficiency of God means that He is able, more than able to accomplish what concerns me today and to handle anything – anything – that comes my way.

I am not able. But He is. I face problems every day that are way too big for me. But not for Him. Because from everlasting to everlasting He is God (Psalm 90:2).

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME WORRY

You may agree with all these reasons I’ve given you not to worry, but you still struggle with it. You may still feel like you’re losing the war. Let me quickly offer three strategies to deal with it.

First, if you’re a chronic worrier, one thing you can do is actually schedule your worry for a specific time of the day, then confine it to that period and not allow it to interfere with the rest of your day. Some counselors advise their clients who are “professional worriers” to do this. Block out a period of, say, 15 minutes and confine your worry to that time. If anxious

thoughts intrude at other times of the day, you can write them down on a card or piece of paper and come back to them during your designated period.

This may sound strange, even silly. And maybe it is. But if you try it, you may discover just how unnecessary and ineffective worry is.

A more biblical strategy is to turn your worries into prayers. Take Paul's message in Philippians 4 to heart and put it into practice: "Don't worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is more wonderful than the human mind can understand" (4:6-7, NLT).

If you want to worry less, pray more. Whenever you start to worry, stop and pray. Give whatever it is that causes anxiety in your life over to God in prayer. And leave it there with Him.

Are you troubled in your spirit? Pray.

Anxious about something? Pray.

Worried about something that may or may not ever come to pass? Pray.

Turn your worries into prayers. Follow the example of the woman who said: "Every evening I turn my worries over to God. He's going to be up all night anyway."

Third, replace your worry with trust. The antidote for anxiety is trust. Child-like, unwavering, rock-solid trust in God. We have a God we can count on to be with us no matter what we encounter in life, and to help us in our times of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

The answer to anxiety is to let God be God and to cast all our cares and worries on Him, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

If you want to win the war against worry, put your trust in the Lord – with all your heart – and keep your eyes on Him. Replace your worry with trust, a trust rooted not in circumstances but in the character and faithfulness and sovereign goodness of God.

Amy Carmichael was a missionary who went to South India in 1895 and stayed until God called her home to heaven in 1951. In a devotional book she wrote called *Edges of His Ways*, she says that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, 1 Chronicles 14:13 refers to a certain place as the Giant's Valley.

I don't know. You may feel as though you are in some kind of Giant's Valley today. Or you may be anxious about the "giants" you may have to face as you look toward tomorrow.

Instead of dwelling on the giants in the valley, Amy Carmichael urged her readers to focus on the work and promise of the Lord, for it says two verses later, in 1 Chronicles 14:15, that God has gone out before us. And what are mountains and valleys, even giant valleys, in the presence of the Lord?

Friends, the Lord has gone out before us. The Lord always goes out before us. The Lord is with us. And for us.

So do not worry. Let the Lord give you victory over worry one moment and one day at a time. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.