

Part 46: Realities and Responses to Anxiety

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Happy Palm Sunday to all of you. This Easter season we are continuing our study through the book of Luke, and today Jesus is going to speak to his disciples about issues surrounding anxiety. Looking at such a text as this on Palm Sunday is providentially powerful.

Palm Sunday is the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9, to much (albeit misunderstood) fanfare of the crowds. But as he rode in, hailed as king, the cross lay heavy on his mind.

In fact, later on in this very chapter in Luke, Jesus speaks of the cross saying, "I have a baptism to be baptized with and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." Anxiety is something our world loves to talk about. But when Jesus speaks to us about our anxiety he doesn't do so as some foreign deity detached from reality. He, as God in the flesh, knew the burden of life in a broken world and the affect it has on our anxiety and emotions.

Now when I spoke on anxiety from the book of Isaiah this past fall, I said that one of the worst pieces of advice you can give someone who wrestles with anxiety is the advice: "Don't be anxious." But if you paid attention to what was just read for us, that's exactly what Jesus says twice! Do not be anxious (vs. 22), do not be worried (vs. 29).

So is Jesus a bad counselor? No. This is what our text today will go to show. But to start, I'll give two reasons why Jesus alone can stand before us and say, "Don't be anxious."

First, because Jesus is God, Lord of heaven and earth, maker and sustainer of our flesh, infinite, endless and eternal, he can command us to do things that no one else can. That's why Jesus commands us to love others. We can tell our kids they need to love their siblings, and I hope you do. But there's a difference isn't there? I command my kids to love because I know they need it. But Jesus can command us to love, or to not be anxious, because he is the ruler of our hearts. He helps us do what seems impossible by human standards. That's the kind of wonderful lordship Jesus has over our lives.

Secondly, there's a beautiful story in John Bunyan's book *Pilgrims Progress*. In it, Christian sees this place of refuge up ahead on the path but there are two lions laying on the grass on either side of the path. He encounters some who see those lions and the real anxiety causes them to turn around. But Christian, so motivated by the command to go on, and the promise of rest, walks that path. The lions lunge at him. But guess what? They were chained. They couldn't reach him. He was safe.

Why do I share this story? It's not poor counsel to say, "Don't be anxious of the lions" when you know the lions are chained. Jesus shows his power over us by commanding us through the Holy Spirit to do what seems difficult by worldly standards. But he shows his care for us by explaining to us why we can and should respond as such. "Don't be anxious"? Why you might ask, "Because your fears are on chains," "They're not as dangerous as you think." Jesus give us our right response, "Don't be anxious" and will go on to show us how the care of the gospel chains our greatest fears.

This is what Jesus is going to do for us today. This morning we are going to see **five responses and realities for worldly anxiety**, that is to say five commands and comforts for those who wrestle with anxiety over the physical things of this world.

This passage doesn't include all the Bible says about anxiety, if you're interested in a more comprehensive treatment of anxiety I'd encourage you to find our sermon from September 11th of this past fall.

But with that said, let's dive in today by reading **Luke 12:22-23**.

Here we see our first response and reality: **Don't be anxious, for life is more**.

If you remember Jesus has been dealing with some difficult topics as of late. He's talked about opposition, rejection, persecution, judgement and the dangers of covetousness. Most of that was directed at the crowds and critics.

But here Jesus turns and speaks to his disciples. What does this mean? It means that even the disciples, the apostles of Jesus, were expected to face the realities of anxiety as they followed him.

Because of sin, anxiety will always be present. There will be things that make us anxious. That word anxiety simply means "intense care" in the Greek. This care is sometimes good. Paul uses this very same verb (*merimnao*) in 1 Corinthians 12 when he calls on members of the church to have "the same care for one another." In other words, sometimes anxious care is good care.

But sometimes, as Jesus speaks of it here, this concern is an undue or an unhealthy concern. It's not reasonable, but instead a consuming and controlling concern which leads away from faith in God.

Disciples have to learn to vet what their own anxiety is and if it's safe or if it's sinful. We do this by the help of others, but also by allowing God's word to shape our understanding as well.

We must do that in our text today because Jesus begins to speak to his disciples with the word, "Therefore." In other words what Jesus is about to share regarding anxiety is only helpful when we understand the context. Consider the story Jesus gave right before this teaching: **Luke 12:15-21**.

So what's the context here? Jesus is wanting us to be aware of two things: First, hope in worldly excess and welfare is a foolish hope. That's because secondly, worldly possessions cannot bring you comfort before God. Through faith we are possessed by the infinite God of the universe. This gives us more peace than if we were to possess all the treasures of the world. This is important because ultimately unless you have peace with God, anxiety will always consume your life.

Much of our anxiety and paranoia in the world is actually the lingering effects of the image of God. Being created in God's image, we know in the back of our minds, that we have to reconcile ourselves somehow. There's a compelling need to feel safe because something is wrong. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 3, "[God] has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end." At root, our anxiety is the itch of eternity which can only be scratched by the God who created us.

So in light of this Jesus gives his response as this God: Don't be anxious.

But notice what he says. It's not simply a blanket statement, he give specifics. Do not be anxious about your life by being anxious about what you eat. Do not be anxious about your body by being anxious about what clothes you will wear.

Jesus' isn't simply saying, "Don't have any concern for your life." Instead he's warning us of the objects we trust to solve our concern: the physical provision of food and clothing. Jesus reveals the reality he's critiquing if you look again at **Luke 12:23**.

What's Jesus' point? Life is more than food and clothing.

Isn't it funny how those two small things can consume so much of our thoughts? We worry about having enough money to buy food and clothe ourselves. We go to school so that we like the rich fool might build bigger closets and larger fridges.

But Jesus says, if you want to live, if you really care about your body, food and clothing still doesn't cut it. What about your general health? What about water? What about air in your lungs? What about your heart pumping blood? What about the nervous system that must trigger endlessly and flawlessly in order for you to continue to breathe, and think, and move?

Life is so much bigger than we think! To only anxious about those two things is to be a bit shortsighted isn't it? The effect this is meant to have on us is to momentarily cause us panic! I'm not anxious about enough!

But then it immediately provides us relief: life is more than these things. If we are rich toward God, then we avoid the pitfalls of endless, infinite, fragile anxiety. There is more to life, dear church, than what is physical. There is a spiritual reality out there and the whole of who we are is not only upheld by the means of food and clothing, but by the sustaining providence of Jesus Christ.

Consider what Paul says in **Colossians 1:17**. Jesus here is beginning to show us that life is bigger than you think. So it pays to see a God who is bigger than that as well. If you think you're ultimately in control of making it through life, then the truth of the matter is that you are not anxious about enough. But if you worship a sovereign God who ordains and sustains providentially, then we can really find some relief.

This is where he goes next. Read with me **Luke 12:24-26**.

So here is our second response and reality: **Consider the ravens, God values us more.**

You want to know something really helpful here. As someone who struggles with anxiety, I find this to be important for my own soul. When we think of the word "consider" we often think of it as a soft option. "Consider this," or "consider that."

But here this word "Consider" is a command, it's an imperative! When our minds are anxious they are typically racing and here Jesus commands us to stop and to think about something else. Start telling your brain what to think about!

He says think of the ravens. For the Jews, the ravens were considered unclean birds, so the fact that Jesus draws their attention to them highlights the often forgotten and disregarded birds in their midst.

We see ravens and crows all the time and what are they generally doing? Aren't they always eating, or else looking for food? Picking at some pinecone, gnawing on some road kill, sorting through some garbage.

In fact it would appear their appetite is insatiable. Yet, they find food. They don't have food pantries, they aren't like the rich man who seeks to build a barn, they don't store it away. They get it and they eat it and they look for more.

Yet despite their number, despite their minimal means, despite their needy stomachs, God feeds them.

Are you not of more value than the birds? We pay no attention to these birds. But God does. He feeds them. Daily. So long as it is today. No food a raven eats across the globe is from any other giver but God himself. If God cares so much for these birds...how much more value are his disciples.

Jesus gives another anxiety producing critique here: If your anxiety can't add a single moment to the day, do you really think your anxious concern for life will have a positive effect on it? Do not miss this warning: If a sovereign God is not trustworthy to you, then you are not anxious about enough.

But if there is a sovereign God who has proven his care for us not merely by feeding us, but most ultimately by sending his son to die for us, then we can trust him. This is what we celebrate when we take the Lord's Supper. We remember that our only provision, the greatest provision has already been given and given endlessly for us in Jesus Christ. It's of no benefit for you to be well fed on the fruit of the world if you are empty of the bread of life in Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives another example of this same sort of consideration in **Luke 12:27-28**.

Here is our third response: **Consider the lily**. The reality behind it: **God clothes us with more**

Go and look at the flowers, and Jesus says watch how they grow.

How do they grow? Slowly, steadily, and into greater and greater beauty.

Isn't this something anyone who follows Jesus needs to know! How often in life and in spiritual matters do we default to a sort of hurricane of energy and chaos flowing here and when growth seems slow we panic at our lack of purpose or production?

We labor to look like we've made it in the world, spinning for promotions, toiling for houses, and we want it now! We repent and put off sin today, but are crushed and despairing when we face the same temptation again tomorrow.

But look at the flowers my friends: slowly, steadily, from a power not of their own they are nourished, and they grow into something beautiful. Then they die and are thrown into the oven.

But how much more will God clothe us who are promised eternal life in the resurrection of Jesus.

You see the desire to be seen as beautiful, precious, meaningful, important, established is common to all of us! But where does God grant this to us? Two places. First, in the modest furnishings of God's

provision. To have clothes, to have a bed, to have food is to be provided for sufficiently even if it's modest! The lily at the end of the day is just grass. Beautiful, but modest.

Second, we find shamefully lavish beauty and embarrassing value in the clothing of Christ's righteousness. Look with me at **Isaiah 61:10**.

Where do we find our enduring beauty and covering? When we are robed in righteousness. This righteousness is in Christ alone because of the work of the cross he takes his beautiful clothing, clothing that brings us peace with God, clothing that covers our vulnerable bits and expunges our blemishes and he wraps us in them.

We don't need to worry about being decked out in the trappings of the world, for God will clothe his disciples in modest provision in today's physical realities, but robes of infinite riches in today's spiritual realities.

This is where Jesus draws our attention to next. **Luke 12:29-30**.

Here is our fourth response and reality. Response: **Don't strain**. The reality behind it, **We have something more**.

So here Jesus says something pretty astounding—almost so astounding that we ignore it.

He says "Do not seek what you are to drink or what you are to eat." Jesus isn't teaching on responsibility he's speaking on anxiety. So what he's curbing is not responsible care, but a straining energy that stems from faithlessness, "O you of little faith."

Now we might say, "What do you mean don't seek those things!" But think of it this way, if you were a parent and your child woke up every day in your house anxious about if there was going to be food on the table, would you take that as a healthy fear? Is that something you'd want them to continue in?

No! We'd want them to trust us. That's what Jesus is getting at here and he makes it a distinction between his disciples and the world.

For the world, for the nations, this daily, physical sustenance is behind everything we do. The Greek word for nations is "ethnos" which is often translated as pagans. The whole world, the world who doesn't know God, the Gentile world longs after these things.

You might say again, "Yes because we need them!" But notice how Jesus doesn't argue that point! Let us pay attention to how Jesus comforts us, don't assume you know what he's saying. Listen to what he's saying.

Read it again: **Luke 12:29-30**.

Don't strive, don't worry, don't wake up caring that the primary thing in life is how we will match the physical demands of a physical world. Why? Because your Father knows that you needs those things.

God created us. He's not surprised that we need food and clothing, he's not surprised that we want to be sheltered. He made us that way. He's also not surprised that sin so often blinds us to the simple

reality that God cares about those needs in our lives more than we ever could. He knows we need them and the implication is that he is going to meet them.

God seeks these things for us. He cares about these things for us. Remember the ravens? Remember the lilies? They trust this.

Food matters, clothing matters. God made us physical as well as spiritual. Paul warns us not to be without care in this area for if you do not work, you do not eat. We are not to sit and do nothing expectantly waiting for God to provide for us.

But because God cares for the physical, earthly needs in our lives what are we to do? Seek the Kingdom. Read with me **Luke 12:31**

Seek his kingdom.

Why? Because all these things, the very things the world is longing for, will be added to you if you find his kingdom. This is our last point this morning: **Seek the Kingdom**. Why? Because **we will get even more**.

What does that mean? Well it means that if your primary motivation in life is to secure for yourself in this world life and satisfaction, you're going to miss everything. You'll be like the rich man in the passage before this who has storehouses of food but still dies, and that to eternal damnation, on account of your sins.

You can spend your life in anxious toil towards these things and never get the relief you hope to find. I wonder how many of us know the pain of that kind of anxiety? This is an anxiety that bends not towards God's provision, but away from it—away to the things of the world that do not care for you, towards the things of this world that have no idea what you actually need.

But there is a Father who cares, who knows exactly what you need and if you seek his kingdom, then you will get everything. Does this mean you get all the riches and all the wealth you've ever wanted? Yes! And no!

No, in the sense that this isn't promised. What's promised is food and clothing not extravagance. But this is what Jesus told us to pray for, "Give us this day our daily bread." For the Christian committed to following Jesus as our first priority, God will generally take care of those daily needs.

But it's actually in those instances where God doesn't, where through unfortunate circumstances or persecution we actually lose our life that, yes, we do actually get the riches and wealth we've hoped for in Jesus and in glory.

Look at what Paul says in **Ephesians 1:11-14**. What does eternity hold for the believer? The riches of provision for us in Christ in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

In the face of an anxious world there's an indestructible and untouchable peace in this kingdom.

So what does it look like to seek the kingdom? That's the big thing Jesus gives us to quell our anxiety. What does it look like to let go of anxiety in this kingdom by living and longing for the next?

I want to give three quick applications:

First, come to the King.

We cannot get into the kingdom of God, we cannot see the kingdom of God without seeing Jesus as the king and the way in which we are brought into it. If you are not a believer in here today I hope that your anxiety is actually helpful to this end. Your problem is bigger than you can manage, life is more than food and your body more than clothing. All of us, each of us in here have sinned and no amount of anxiety can fix that burden.

But we can go to Jesus who cares for us and clothes us in his righteousness, he makes us citizens of his kingdom and we now walk in a reliance rooted in God's provision in the gospel.

Second, share the gospel of the kingdom.

Have you ever watched a documentary about people surviving in the woods, or families wrestling in a third world country? When you look at your pantry after that do you ever stand in shock at how much food you already have? When we begin to share the eternal gospel to eternal souls with eternity at stake the lesser things in life are shown as just that.

Be aware of the eternal realities of life and death and the fear of storing up futile treasure here on earth by revealing to others the immense provision we have in Jesus. To be consumed with the provision of Jesus to save eternally helps us be content with the provision of Jesus for us today.

And lastly, long for the relief of the eternal kingdom.

For many of us we will still wrestle with hunger, anxiety and discomfort now as we follow Jesus. But we must learn to remind ourselves that this is not the kingdom. That still stands in front of us and if want to be certain of it, we must be vigilant to not allow worldly experiences or desires to cloud our hope held out for us in heaven.

Because in that day, our bodies, our emotions, and everything else will be perfected. Death is the leash that holds all of our anxieties at bay. The saints will walk through it to safe passage and provision, and the dangers of life will always remain on the outside.

Pray to that end that we might weaponized the anxieties of the world for the certainty of peace in the next.