

“Age of Anxiety (Part II)”

The Way of Jesus

Downtown & Lexington

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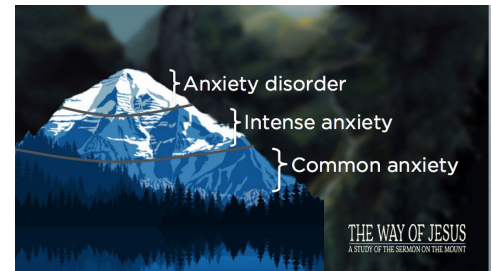
This fall we've been studying through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Looked at His upside down values in the beatitudes. Then His interpretations of Old Testament law, all the “You have heard _____, but I tell you _____.” And here in Ch. 6 Jesus is exposing the heart behind what we do: Why do we pray, Why do we practice generosity? Last week and this week, He's teaching why do we get anxious and how do we find freedom from it? Anxiety is a massive problem for modern American, and in this chaotic year, Jesus' teaching is timely.

Anxiety is also a broad term with a range of experiences, so we introduced the anxiety mountain:

Level 1 - Common anxiety. Day to day anxious, fearful or worried thoughts and feelings. Everyone experiences this.

Level 2 - Intense anxiety. May or may not be clinical, but it's a more intense season. Worries you can't shake easily.

Level 3 - Anxiety disorders. Top of the mountain is clinical, diagnosed disorders. Really dangerous, cold and lonely.



Last week we mostly focused on the problem. Anxiety is a multi-faceted, invasive reality in human existence ever since the fall. It's tricky and dangerous, because **it tells partial truths** and because it points us to false saviors in our **search for security** in this broken world. For today, we're looking at “How does the way of Jesus help us find freedom from anxiety in a broken world?” And as we do, we're going to see Jesus tie together three ideas - anxiety, love of money and selfishness. We don't always think of those as connected but Jesus does.

There are three keys to freedom from anxiety in the Way of Jesus:

1.) Our anxiety needs the whole truth, not just part of it. Look back at v. 19 and 26.

Let's start back in 26:

Matthew 6:26, 28-30

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ...And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you?

So Jesus uses two interesting greek words in v. 26 and 28 when He says “Look at the birds of the air ... and ... “Consider the lilies of the field.

- **Look** in v. 26 is emblepō - to look on, to observe fixedly, to discern clearly; metaphorically it means to look or gaze upon something... with your mind.
- **consider** is katamanthanō - to learn thoroughly, examine carefully.
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So both words are about how we think. Since anxious thought is telling us partial, to be free from anxiety, Jesus calls us to think better, to think more fully. He says think... LOOK at the fact that God is actively keeping 400+ billion birds fed. Look at that. Think about what that means.

- And then He ends with a rhetorical - Aren't you more valuable than they are?

So this is interesting right: Which reality is true: Broken world or good God? Yes. Are there birds and people who go hungry? Yeah sure. But to let anxiety focus our eyes and minds on that fact solely, is to miss the bigger picture of the story. The bigger reality is that even in the midst of this broken world, God is at work. He is feeding 400+ billion birds. He will take care of you who He cares about much more. He will give you what you need to glorify Him for the length of days He gives you on this earth.

Jesus isn't asking us to turn our brains off, be blindly optimistic or stop being honest about the broken reality of life in a sinful world... He's calling us to fix our eyes on the fact that God is at work in all of it. Yes life is broken, AND God is working to put it all back together. Yes the circumstances of life are outside of your control, AND God is always in control. He is not panicked. And He is a good Father King.

So to be free from anxiety, we need to think large about the whole truth... and then from that vantage point we can see the lies that anxiety is telling us. Look back at verses 19 and 26.

Matthew 6:19, 26

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust[e] destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ...Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns...

Remember what we said last week, barns and laid up treasures are not just about luxury, they're about security. And Jesus is showing us there's a lie hidden in the thought process of "Just a little more in my barns... Just a little more stored-up treasure and then I won't be anxious."

That's not true. If you believe "I just need a little bit more to be ok" then you will never find enough. So a few years back, a group of scientists with the World Health Organization studied over 147,261 people in 26 countries. They were focused on Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and here's what they found:

- People from countries classified as middle-income countries were 75% more likely to suffer from GAD in their lifetime than those from low-income countries. People from high-income countries were 78% more likely to have it than those from middle-income countries. 213% more likely than those from low-income countries.

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Did you catch that? People in countries with the highest standards of living were more than 200% more likely to have generalized anxiety disorder than those with the lowest standard of living.

Now the study didn't go into the "why", but the point is clear: having more material possessions does not make anxiety go away. As one notorious philosopher summarized it: "Mo' money. Mo' problems." ... not less. Problems.

If we're going to walk in the way of Jesus and be truly free from anxiety, then we need the whole truth. Yes, having money to cover basic needs and care for those around me is good and NO, my financial circumstances are not proof of whether or not God cares about me. I already know that based on the cross. I already know that because He's clothing grass with flowers and feeding 400+ billion birds that don't matter. I ALREADY KNOW the whole truth, big story. So I can interpret my day to day realities in light of the bigger truth.

And as we set our minds and hearts on the whole truth, our anxiety starts to be uprooted. We start to see the lies and the half truths and the attacks on God's goodness and character. And because our anxiety needs the whole truth, we're going to need both soft words of comfort and hard words of correction when we're believing lies. This is the second key to freedom from anxiety in the way of Jesus.

2.) Our anxiety needs both soft words of comfort and hard words of correction.

As I sat with this passage, it stunned me how Jesus brings both comforting words and sharp rebuke intertwined. Almost two equal and opposite tones at the same time:

Here's where I see softer words of courage and encouragement:

- In verse 20 we learn that there's a way to store up eternal treasure in heaven that cannot be touched by moth or rust or thieves. It's totally, eternally, perfectly secure. Man, so good. That's really encouraging.
- In verse 26 we learn that the sparrows don't work hard in the fields or gather in barns, and yet God takes care of them. You know He cares about you more than them right?
- In verse 30 we learn that if God clothes the grass of the field with beautiful robes... the same grass we chop down and start fires with, how much more does He care about you than chopped up fire starting grass?!?!?
- And in verse 32 we learn that God knows all that you need before you even ask for it.

How comforting are those reminders? We need that. I need that! In the midst of our anxiety, no matter how intense, we need God's Word and good friends who will remind us of these comforting, encouraging truths - "Hey, God loves you and I love you. You are seen and valued by the King of the universe. He will not let you go."

And right there in the middle of the exact same passage Jesus also says some really hard things:

Matthew 6:24

No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money.

Part of your problem is that you love and worship money more than God. And as long as that's the case, you're going to be anxious. Because money is a false god and it'll always fail you. Never enough. That's a hard, confrontational word to middle class, American Christians, but we need it.

Matthew 6:27

And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?

Remind me again, which of us through anxiety can add a single hour to our lives? None ya. Jesus isn't playing around with our illusion of control. He rips that bandaid right off in verse 34:

Matthew 6:34

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

The hardness of this one doesn't leap off the page at us but Jesus just said, don't be too busy being anxious about tomorrow's trouble. Today's got plenty of trouble. And tomorrow will too. And so with the tomorrow after that.

In other words, Jesus is saying if you start with the assumption that life will be easy... then life is going to be very hard, full of a lot of anxiety. But if you start with the assumption that life in a broken world will be hard... then you'll be a lot better prepared to handle it when it is.

In all of this, Jesus models for us that our anxiety needs both soft words of encouragement and hard words of rebuke. The danger is that we would only know how to speak and how to hear one of those and we

would have no balance. The danger is in seeking out community that only speaks nice, soft, kind words to you and never confronts you when you need it.

But in Jesus' kingdom, in His way of life we're called to way more than that kind of shallow, empty, imbalanced fandom unreality. Jesus beats the drum that we're all sinners living in a broken over and over. Translation: You're gonna have problems. And He's also gonna beat the drum: You have a good, good Father King who sees you and cares about you. You can trust Him.

With Jesus, it isn't either/or. It's both/and.

And this is really helpful because sometimes it doesn't even cut clean at all. Sometimes the comforting word of encouragement and the hard word of rebuke are intertwined. Look at verse 30:

Matthew 6:30

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, (If He just stopped there, that's so nice and comforting and warm, right?... but He finishes...) O you of little faith?"

I remember in my most intense season of anxiety, I had two interactions with two friends where I needed this kind of encouragement and rebuke all wrapped up in one. The first happened the first time I confessed that I was dealing with really dark thoughts. I was a mess. Sobbing. I choked out "I think my wife and kids would be better off without me." And one of my closest friends firmly said "Jon stop. Tell me about your kids. Tell me about their life before you adopted them." And he forced me to reset my mind in reality. He would not let my anxious thoughts run roughshod in my mind. It was this insane mixture of comforting me with the truth that God had radically changed my kid's lives and used me in that process... and a strong rebuke at the same time that I was living way outside of reality. I needed both in that moment.

The second one came a week later. Still very much in the thick of it. Another of my closest friends was checking in on me. And at some point he looked at me and said, "Jon I have good news and bad news. The bad news is I cannot promise that this is ever going to get better. I cannot promise that the anxiety will go away. I don't know if your circumstances will change or not." I think I interrupted him, "Man, I don't know if I can handle this right now." And he said, "I know... but it's true. What I do know is that God will be with you in the midst of it no matter what happens."

Wait which one is that?? Soft and encouraging or hard rebuke? Yes. Both? Something different and beautiful and needed in Jesus' kingdom. I'll just tell you for me in my anxiety, I needed both. I have looked back to those moments over and over for encouragement.

So when you're dealing with anxiety, listen to me. Sometimes, you're going to have to rebuke it and realign your thoughts with God's truth. Sometimes, you're going to need good friends to look you in the eyes and say "Stop it. Don't believe that. Don't let your thoughts and heart go there."

And other times you're going to need to rest in the simplest, most comforting truths that God loves you and He cares about you and He sees you. Sometimes you need a verse and sometimes you need a hug. Sometimes you need Jesus to wrap you up in His embrace. And sometimes You need Him to sit you down. Both are good. Both are love. Both are needed to find freedom.

Now when you're the one helping the person trapped in anxiety, I have good news and bad news. Bad news - there isn't a formula for which one you need to use when. Overall, you need to give your friend a healthy balanced diet of both. It's like losing weight. Which is needed, good nutrition or good exercise? Yes. Both.

How do you know which one to give them and when? Bad news - I don't have a formula to give you. Good news - Jesus gives us His Spirit to walk through it with us. Pray. Pray a lot. Ask God's Spirit. Bring it into the light in community where different people can pray and hold accountable and encourage and all help the suffering person together.

3.) Our anxiety needs to be recentered on a new foundation.

Matthew 6:33

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

-Seek - zēteō - to seek in order to find, to seek by thinking, meditating or reasoning, to strive after, to demand, to crave.

-Righteousness - dikaiosynē - in a broad sense: state of being as you ought to be, the condition acceptable to God, right standing with God, yourself and others.

In all of this teaching on money and anxiety, the thing Jesus hammers on the most is that you need a new foundational reality. A new kingdom, a new central goal and pursuit. A new source of identity and authority and direction for your life. He hits this over and over again.

-In verses 19-21, Jesus shows us that stored up treasure on earth or stored up treasure in heaven. Which one is it gonna be? It can only be one. Your money will tell you which one you're really chasing.

-In verses 22-23, Jesus shows us that we view the world through either a good eye or bad eye. Which one is it gonna be? How do you fundamentally look at the world? Selfish greedy eye. Whole world exists for you? Or good healthy eye that sees the whole truth. God is in charge and you're here to love Him and love others?

-In verse 24, Jesus shows us that You can't serve two masters. God or money. Which one is it gonna be?

-In verse 25, Jesus shows us that you know life is more than material creature comforts and survival right? Jesus' kingdom or American dream kingdom? Which one are you centered on?

-In verses 26-28, Jesus shows the Gentiles, that they're consumed with chasing all these things. But that's not you. You've been rescued out of the kingdom of this world and into the kingdom of Jesus. Out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. Right? Is that you? Which kingdom is your foundation?

Is your central pursuit and aim in life right-relationship with God or right-relationship with your bank account? One will give you eternal security and peace beyond understanding and one will give you a pervasive anxiety that can never have enough.

If we're foundationally chasing security through money, comfort and control, then we'll never have enough. We'll never find the eternal security we're looking for.

If your foundation is chasing security through relationships and romance, you'll never escape anxiety. Because men and women make for bad gods. Seek first God's kingdom and you'll find a love that is unshakeable. A Father and an adopted family for all eternity.

If your foundation is chasing after hope and security through politics, you'll never escape anxiety. Seek first His kingdom and He'll give you a peace that can't be shaken by any election.

Jesus has really, really good news and also some bad news for us about our anxiety. A life free from being dominated by and enslaved to anxiety is possible!! But it's going to cost us everything.

Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness ... Re-center your whole life on this foundation... and you'll find real security, comfort and control will all be byproducts because God is secure. He is the God of all comfort. He is actually in control. He will provide for your needs and you'll be able to trust Him even when it feels like there isn't enough.

More might need to happen, but if you don't shift your fundamental, your way down off the mountain is always going to be in trouble. You're always going to be tempted to run right back up. Always gonna feel stuck. Freedom from slavery to anxiety is possible. It's found in Jesus' kingdom. And living in His kingdom requires submission to Jesus as king and repentance from all other false gods and saviors including money and political power and control. There's no way around it. **Let's pray.**

