

Matthew 6:31

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now to the gospel according to Matthew, the sixth chapter, reading at verse 31. Matthew chapter 6 and verse 31.

Therefore take no thought, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewithal shall we be clothed?

Amen. Now last Lord's Day we were reflecting in the evening on the inspiration of Holy Scripture. And as a consequence of its inspiration, its authority for every aspect of the life of the Christian. And I suppose that a few of us here this morning would question the authority over all of the word of God. We certainly acknowledge that the Bible has authority in the realm of doctrine.

[1 : 21] It controls what we ought to believe and teach. It has authority also in the realm of practice. It dictates how we ought to behave.

It lays down certain prohibitions and certain precepts of conduct. And we are also, of course, quite conscious of its authority in terms of church order and church government and things like public worship.

We confess that the Bible must control the way the church is governed and the way the church conducts itself in its public worship.

And so we are perfectly familiar with the idea of its authority in doctrine, in practice, and in matters ecclesiastical.

But there is one absolutely vital area of our lives in which the Bible is equally authoritative.

[2 : 26] And in which, nevertheless, we ourselves are often guilty of conducting ourselves quite regardless of the word of God.

And what I have in mind particularly is the whole realm of Christian emotions. We allow that God's word should dictate our theology, our practice, our church government.

But we are hardly at all conscious that the authority of the Bible extends to the depths of our own emotional lives.

We are scarcely conscious that there is a heresy of the emotions as there is a heresy of the intellect or a heresy in practice.

One might even argue that the most common aberration and deviation in the church of God is not intellectual and it's not even practical.

[3 : 46] The commonest deviation is emotional deviation from the pattern which God has given to us in Holy Scripture.

In other words, our moods are very often not Christian. Our moods are very often God-defying moods.

Our moods are very often totally unregulated by the teaching of Holy Scripture. And what I mean is that the Bible has a great deal of teaching on this whole problem of the emotions.

It has teaching, for example, on the problem of depression. The tendency of the people of God to be despondent, to be downcast.

Now it may be that those who experience those depths of emotions, that these people are totally orthodox so far as their doctrine goes.

[4 : 59] And they are totally blameless so far as outward behavior and relationships go. But in their emotions, in their despondency, in their depression, they are violating a fundamental directive of the Word of God.

Because the Bible's perspective on depression is one of challenge. It is one of intolerance.

It is to say that this is quite untypical of a Christian and that it has no place at all in the normal Christian life.

What I mean is that depression is not a Christian emotion.

It is something that the Lord's people may be subject to. But it is not something they ought to experience. The Bible confronts all our despondencies with a challenge of Psalm 42.

[6 : 19] Why art thou cast down? Or in terms of the Lord's challenge in the Old Testament to Elijah. What doest thou here, Elijah?

What are you doing under this juniper tree? What are you doing moping and self-pity? What are you doing as a Christian in this particular position?

When you know so clearly that the Spirit's fruit is love, joy, and peace. And so then, what's wrong with your emotional state?

We find the same thing with regard to discontent. In Philippians 4, where the Apostle Paul tells us, I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content.

Now there surely is a normative statement as to the way that believers ought to feel. We ought to be characterized by the most profound discontent.

[7 : 32] By the most profound content. Now again, I don't mean that if we are discontent, we're not Christians. Because we see that even Paul himself says, I have learned to be content.

In other words, it wasn't instinctive to the Apostle. It wasn't a question of natural temperament. It wasn't something of which he had always been capable.

There had been times, I am sure, that Paul could remember when he had been very discontent. But he says that he has learned to be content.

Now it's no use saying, yes, but if Paul were in my condition, Paul wouldn't be content. Because what the Apostle in fact does say, is that whatever state he is in, whatever his own outward condition or circumstances may be, he has learned in all the variations, in all the ups and all the downs.

He has learned in all the privations. He has learned to be content. And over against that affirmation of what is possible for us, as Paul says, I can do all things in Christ.

[8 : 57] Over against that we say that there is something wrong with any Christian life that is marked by discontent.

Discontent is a heresy of the Christian emotions. And the same thing is true of anxiety.

The Bible faces it in the most explicit terms. The Lord faces it as a current and critical pastoral problem.

And the Lord makes his position on worry and anxiety totally unambiguous. It has no place in life. It lies under the ban of Jesus Christ. And that is the point of the text which we have before us this morning in Matthew 6 and verse 31.

[10 : 06] Take no thought say what shall we eat or what shall we drink or wherewithal shall we be clothed. Let's remind ourselves first of all of what exactly it is that Christ has in mind.

Take no thought. The apostle is not the Lord is not saying that we must not think about these things. It's not that we must give our mind to those economic and temporal problems.

Notice the Lord said that we must never plan or think ahead or make provision or calculate on certain possibilities or even to take steps to avoid certain foreseen dangers and possibilities in our own situation.

Far less is the Lord saying to you must not work and apply ourselves in all those areas eating drinking and clothing and so on.

We have to use our intelligence we have to use our industry we have to use our own foresight in this area as in all other areas.

[11 : 33] The Lord's real concern is with anxiety and with worry is something that as the Lord will tell us was and is very very prevalent in the non-believing community something which in fact is characteristic of that community but which tragically is often also present in the church of Jesus Christ himself.

and something of which in a most perverse way Christian people are often proud as if somehow worry were the symbol of seriousness this symbol of godly of godliness the symbol of commitment whereas in fact Christ says it has no place in our Christian lives it is not the symbol of godliness or the symbol of gravity it is a symbol of the fact that our perspectives and priorities are completely wrong and completely askew it is a symbol of a breakdown of our own faith now I'm not for the moment going into the question of what worry is in any great depth that belongs to a different province than mine

I want simply to mention very briefly two features that belong to this anxiety within the biblical perspective itself what the bible itself says I think first of all that this worry is always associated with fear this worry is fear of the future and very often it is not fear of the foreseen or predictable or even the probable future it is fear of the possible future it is the imagination playing neurotically on all the things that may go wrong the mind obsessed not with today and its challenges but obsessed with tomorrow and its possibilities what could go wrong with the family on their way to school what could happen to the husband on his way from work what could go wrong as one tries to preach this particular sermon what could go wrong with examinations the mind playing fearfully and obsessively with possible although very often quite improbable disasters losing out in the present because we are obsessed with fears that pertain to tomorrow it is fear it is obsessional fear it is fear very often of the imaginary as we visualize to ourselves what can possibly go wrong and then the second thing that belongs to this whole idea is what the Lord

I think means literally in this particular word distraction he is more or less saying to us don't be distracted don't be divided isn't that one of the terrible things about worry that it distracts it divides it distracts the attention from the present with its challenges its difficulties its responsibilities its opportunities its blessings its privileges its pleasures it takes us away from these it divides it claims our attention for the mundane for the hypothetical and in doing so it diverts our energy away from what is primary and what is essential and what indeed very often is absolutely urgent and absolutely pressing worry above all takes your mind away from the primary things from the kingdom of

God that's why the whole context here it is not only the mental state that the Lord is interested in but what the mental state refers to it is not being distracted simply but being distracted by what Spurgeon called the world's trinity of cares what we shall eat what we shall drink what we shall put on it is all the Lord was saying that if what were distracting us was the spiritual and the eternal that's what was making us absent minded and divided in our attention to our profession and our families that it wouldn't be so bad but the terrible thing is that we are distracted from the urgent and the present and the domestic and the professional and the here and now and above all from the spiritual and the eternal we are distracted and diverted from those by those questions of what we shall eat and what we shall read and what we shall put on so the

[18:06] Lord is talking about a mental state that is one of fear and that is one of destruction and that is one of obsession with those present and very temporal realities and the Lord says categorically do not do it he forbids it and it is absolutely categorical it is not a gentle exhortation it is not the Lord saying it would be best if you were able not to worry it is the Lord saying to us that it has no place he is saying to us it is intolerable in a Christian that he should have those fears that he should be so distracted that he should be so obsessed those fears those distractions and those obsessions they have he says no place whatever in the life of a

Christian but the Lord doesn't leave it there the Lord is not content simply to state categorically the Lord argues the Lord shows us the reasons behind his exhortation that is why he says therefore and the earlier the same advice in verse 25 you'll find again that there is a therefore now it's only in many ways a detail I'm sure to you but what is saying to us is this that behind this great item of what we may call directional and judgmental counseling behind that there is all the logic of Christian theology this dissuasion this prohibition follows directly from the whole teaching of the word of God therefore take no thought because there are certain great things which are true because there are certain principles you are not to be fearful not to be distracted not to be obsessed there is therefore behind the exhortation what is the therefore what is the logic what are the great arguments by which Christ reinforces and drives home this exhortation now the arguments again are in many ways very commonplace and very obvious the first is this that such anxiety is totally and utterly futile you see verse 27 how the Lord says which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to stature which of you by hearing all those hypothetical possibilities by having nightmares about all that can go wrong tomorrow which of you by tossing and turning sleeplessly working yourselves into states of acute tension making yourselves physically ill through anxiety which of you by doing any of those things can add one cubit to your stature can add an inch to your physical growth can add one day to your lives the whole thing

Christ says is futile it produces absolutely nothing on the contrary its result its effect is to reduce efficiency to reduce concentration it is to enervate to minimize your energy to weaken to drain you to leave you less competent to deal with today and its problems and so Christ says do not be

anxious do not be divided don't be fearful don't be obsessional about those things because that is absolutely futile it produces nothing and then one may add this it is he says a purely gentile characteristic you see in verse 32 following following directly from the exhortation of verse 31 the Lord says after all these things do the

Gentiles seek in other words this anxiety is something which is typically Gentile and what the Lord is saying is this you are not Gentiles and in fact he is saying to us that one of the most important principles of self management available to a Christian is to keep on reminding himself of what he is and of what he is not and he says the moment you find yourselves obsessed with the world's trinity of cares then you bring yourself up sharp and you say to yourself I'm thinking like a Gentile I'm behaving like an unconverted man

[24 : 17] I am behaving in a totally carnal and totally unchristine way that principle underlies the whole Sermon on the Mount because it all begins by the Lord reminding us what kind of people we are and because of what we are we have certain attitude to our enemies and to the truth and to prayer and to alms and to fasting we have also a certain attitude to this world and to its goods because we are not Gentiles and because we are not Gentiles we do not have Gentile obsessions now sometimes it can be exceedingly salutary to say to ourselves look that's just the way you felt before your conversion you are relapsing you are falling back into pagan and into majority attitudes the moment

Christians become obsessed with food become obsessed with drink become obsessed with their clothes with their cosmetics with their appearance with their hairstyle with the kind of home they've got the kind of house they've got the kind of job they've got the moment those who become our obsessions the moment we become neurotic about them that moment we have relapsed and then we are face to face with all the shuddering force of this principle after all these things do the Gentiles seek and I know that it's terribly obvious it's terribly mundane but I also know that the major deviations of our Christian lives are due to overlooking the obvious the reason why many Christian lives have lost their tone is because they overlook the obvious and here is something dreadfully obvious you are not Gentiles and yet here we are worrying like Gentiles now it is a very serious thing when the incidence of psychiatric illness among Christians approaches the average incidence of such illness in society it is something that reflects the severest discredit on the church when the level of anxiety among believers is as high as level among unbelievers we have all become Gentiles I'm not saying that all mental illness is in itself sinful but I am saying that we have to be exceedingly careful that we do not simply average out at a level of neurosis that is almost the same as that of the

Gentile community because I'm face to face with this you are not Gentiles and there should not be the level of anxiety or the level of insomnia or the level of drug dependence among Christians to cope with life that there is among others because you are not Gentiles and so he says to them you must not be anxious or worried in this neurotic way because it's futile you must worry because it is so typically Gentile and he says also you must not do it because it is so desperately unworthy these obsessions come back to them again what shall we eat what shall we drink where will all shall we be clothed and what is the Lord's rebuke to that in verse 25 it's not the life more than food and the body even raiment and yet if our great obsessions are food drink clothes cosmetics then what we are saying is that these are the things that constitute life these are the meaning of life and whoever will the trouble reminds this morning we may deny it

I put it to you that there is always a possibility that a Christian life can shrink to that but for a Christian the obsessions are what he eats and if I may put it more elegantly what kind of table he has his obsessions are what he drinks and what he wears and what he or she looks like we have shrunk and to that has become life in other words we are living purely as what Paul would call natural men we are living on the level where life has shrunk to us until at last our obsession for those of the other living souls of Genesis 1 we know that man has so much in common with the animals made on the same day made of the same chemicals called within our living soul those living souls these are their obsessions what they shall eat and what they shall drink and where they'll find heat and warmth and surely it is so evident for example in television advertising that these today are the definition of life for many people food drink clothes cosmetics

[31 : 18] Caribbean holidays that is life and so many other worries are directed towards those where can we find the money for such food for such drink for such clothing for such a home for such a holiday and life has shrunk to those terribly narrow confines the Lord is saying surely life is more

than that in fact let me put it to you at the most elementary level of your own ambitions are you equating life with a fulfillment of any one of your own ambitions does life depend on one ambition on any complex of earthly ambitions we have to be totally serious about that those things you worry about you're only worrying the Lord says because it becomes so big they've come to be synonymous with life because your vision of life is so contracted and that's why Christ says don't worry because all this worry is the result of a totally unworthy view of human existence it is quite possible to a very little food very little drink very little fine clothes and yet to life

Paul would say for me to live is Christ to live is to know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent and it's only because our vision contracts so terribly it's only for that reason that we are often characterized by this neurotic anxiety with regard to the present and its problems so the Lord has said to us that all this worry is futile the Lord has said to us that it is characteristically gentle the Lord has said that it is unworthy but the Lord says one thing more he says to us that it is terribly unbelieving and that's why we have the maritalist argument from verse 28 consider the lilies of the field how they grow they toil not neither do they spin and yet I say to you that even

Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these wherefore if God so clothed the grass of the field which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven shall he not much more clothe you or ye of little faith and the same thing with the birds look at the birds he says watch the birds they saw not neither do they reap nor gather into barns and yet he says your heavenly father feedeth them are ye not much better than they and the whole glory of that lies in verse 26 where the Lord says your heavenly father feedeth them you will see the

Lord is not saying who feeds them their heavenly father it's not their heavenly father that he is your heavenly father and your father feeds them are ye not much better than they and then the terrible sting of verse 30 shall he not much more clothe you oh ye of little faith where does all the worry come proud oh we say proudly it comes from my real listen it comes from my diligence from my devotion from my commitment it comes from my sense of responsibility and from my professional commitment and care well

I hear a voice it's not my voice but it's a voice that says it comes from little faith let's remind ourselves that these words are not written or spoken out of the context of any idyllic and peaceful and carefree existence these are the words of one who said the foxes of holes and the birds of the air of nests but the son of man has no place to lay his head they're the words of a homeless outcast their words spoken under the shadow of calvary spoken out of the very heart of isolation and rejection and he says that our worry or anxiety comes from little faith a lack of confidence in our heavenly father the confidence that is mandatory in terms of

[37 : 34] Paul's great utterance in Romans 8 God worketh all things together for good to them that love not to worry not because we know that God will always give us exactly what we want but because we know that even when he withholds even when he doesn't give even when he works things out differently from our own desires that he does it because his idea of the good and our idea are different love and the great challenges whether you and I have the faith to leave it to God to work it out it may be we today have one great shadow over our lives it may be some crisis in your employment it may be some examination it may be the preaching of one sermon and well I say yes think about it plan it try to foresee the difficulties make every possible preparation and then go to bed and sleep soundly it is vain for you to rise betimes and late at night to keep to feed on sorrow's bread because with the same result

God gives sleep to his beloved it's a very simple homely picture where there is real faith a man who is carrying great responsibilities can go to bed and sleep quietly God gives sleep there are many Christians and there is nothing they need more than to ask God to give them a good night's sleep they have lost it because of their own unbelief and they have lost it because they are not quite prepared to leave the issue in God's hand it matters too much to us that we should pass an examination it matters too much to us that we should have success in some particular project and we have taken out of the whole attitude the whole approach we have taken out of a dear volente God willing that is God we are not content with dear volente we are not content with having God's will we want to dictate to God and I am frightened that the real neurosis is neurosis about God that he won't do exactly what we want that is the neurosis and it is over against that that the Lord says look at the lilies look at the birds you heavenly father he does all things well and maybe one of the things that he does well is not giving us our wishes there may be times in life when we say oh that I

had the wings of a dove days when our whole volitional commitment our longing our desperation is godless where there is no submission there is no realization that sometimes failure is God's will that sometimes it's God's will that we should not get to the very top that we should not get what we want and we are no longer praying

Lord thy will be done that we are praying Lord I want my will to be your will and that's where the neurosis comes in and instead I'm saying let us do with regard to every obligation let's do everything that can be done let's make all the preparation let's engage in all the planning let's keep ourselves fit to deal with emerging crisis let's do all that and then let's go sleep confident that we shall get what God thinks appropriate and that there is no guilty indolence or no guilty carelessness or no guilty presumption on our part we have done what was required and then the neurotic says yes but having done all that it may go wrong of course it may go wrong and of course it may not go wrong and of course at four o'clock in the morning it's all going wrong until I come back to this Lord I have done what you told me to do and now I leave it to you to give me the prosperity in the affair which you think is appropriate give me the mark that you think is appropriate give me the job if you think it's appropriate let us not be desperate to ensure that God will throw the dice exactly as we should want it but let's leave it in the hands of our heavenly father absolute trust in the way that he disposes of our affairs so there are those and maybe other arguments to behind the Lord's plea that we should not be anxious don't be anxious because it's futile don't be anxious because it's Gentile don't be anxious because it's unworthy and don't be anxious because it's unbelieving and then one more point and very briefly what are the alternatives alternatives to anxiety and you see again how marvelous is the Lord's pastoral theology he just doesn't say to us don't worry because that's negative and that leaves a vacuum

[44 : 35] Lord I've put out the worry but what goes in its place because there must always be some positive to fill the vacuum otherwise the negative the anxiety the neurosis returns so you've got to fill your mind with something that's going to keep out that neurosis the Lord says two or three points which I just want to itemize very very briefly and the first is this live one day at a time now it is a very mundane very human principle but it's one which I derived from the last verse of this great chapter therefore take no thought for the morrow for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof the whole problem with worry is the fear the fear of tomorrow the fear of possibilities the fear of hypotheses the Lord says don't be divided or distracted by tomorrow he doesn't say don't think about tomorrow he doesn't say don't plan for tomorrow because planning for tomorrow is part of today's responsibility but he says don't be divided by tomorrow don't be distracted don't be diverted by tomorrow in other words sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof today has enough duties enough responsibilities enough problems the great danger in your houses of course is that we are so bedeviled by imaginations about tomorrow that we aren't fit to deal with the problems of today with the result that today's problems carry over into tomorrow and become very much worse and so on until the whole thing becomes unmanageable and we end up in a nervous breakdown so the

Lord says take it easy one day at a time what must I do today what can be done today what is obligatory what is possible today what is manageable today I think one of the great problems is that so often we see life as one overwhelming and intimidating undifferentiated mass of difficulties and the whole thing comes at you like an immense snowball those of you who know the code of practice and philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous will know that one of the great principles enshrined in their philosophy although I don't at all endorse their philosophy in its entirety or in fact in its innermost essence but I do endorse this principle that they undertake to keep sober today you see sometimes they can say well I'll be sober for the rest of my life now these men say forget about the rest of your life forget about twenty years years forget about that today stay sober today deal with it today with today's problems break life into manageable proportions sufficient unto the day is the evil that of let tomorrow take thought for the things of itself we must never bring too much of tomorrow into today because then we end up never having a today to enjoy keep tomorrow keep tomorrow at bay as far as that can be done live one day at a time and then the second principle is seek ye first the kingdom of god and his righteousness now you notice it doesn't say seek only the kingdom of god and his righteousness it says seek it first it's about priorities as our own catechism has it it's about the man's chief end and I think that has appeared time and again as

I've gone through this whole theme this morning that to a large extent the problem is about our own priorities what matters most people only get upset about food and drink and clothes education and

cars and houses because that's what they seek first and the moment these things fall into place as subordinate and secondary then we have the possibility of handing them meaningfully and dealing with them appropriately and that's why this neurotic anxiety is such a non-Christian thing it is un-Christian because it proclaims so eloquently that we have the wrong priorities and the Lord isn't content to say simply the negative you're seeking first the wrong things the Lord shows us what we ought to be seeking the kingdom of God and the righteousness of God in that time one could develop this obsessed seeking first to be in the kingdom of God seeking first of God's kingdom come and increase within oneself but also seeking that that kingdom would come in the world outside now isn't that part of our difficulty that so many Christians have no interest in the world wide prospering or furtherance of God's kingdom we're obsessed and it's the Lord's irony and the Lord's circus and not mine we're obsessed with what we shall treat and we are not obsessed with thy kingdom come thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven and Christ is saying if we had that vision if we had this missionary vision of God's worldwide kingdom if we had this obsession for social righteousness for political justice for religious fidelity for righteousness in the whole breadth of its biblical meaning if we had that obsession then we wouldn't be so anxious we wouldn't be distracted by petty concerns who died and table if our obsession was how can

I bring God's righteousness into human society we have anxiety because our priorities are wrong and as I close and this is very brief I remind you of what Paul says as the third alternative to anxiety and that is this be careful for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God in the place of worry he says take no thought for tomorrow submission to the day is the evil thereof concentrate on today in place of worry concentrate on the kingdom of God in place of worry concentrate on prayer because so often worry is the alternative to prayer in a very significant degree prayer and worry are mutually exclusive it must be one or the other

[53 : 05] I can do two things about my problems I can cast my burdens upon the Lord or I can lose sleep over them but I cannot do both I can say I have cast them on the Lord and lose sleep over them but I cannot really cast them on the Lord and lose sleep over them and so we have this let your requests those things that distract you or that might distract let them be made known to God and the picture as I see it is that it is possible by grace listening to the Lord's arguments and the Lord's teaching it is possible for the believer to create a center of calm and stillness at the very heart of the storm I believe that life is always a storm

I believe that there are always precious always burdens always problems always lights flashing and thunder rolling that's the way it is that's the way it is always going to be and I believe if you listen to the wind if you look at the waves then we're going to be anxious we're going to be neurotic we're going to be mad but it is possible at the center of it all in faith in Christ it is possible there to be asleep just as Christ was in the storm asleep and they ran and they woke him up so harshly and said master do you not care we're perishing and why are you sleeping he was in the same danger he knew all about the danger but he was God's beloved and God had given him sleep if I can come from the sublime to the ridiculous virtually

Harold Wilson said once that the greatest prerequisite for a prime minister was sleep and I think that whatever that gentleman went by it is a fundamental and monumental biblical principle God gives sleep to his beloved in the midst of all the distractions my peace I leave with you and in the middle of that peace God's beloved come sleep because they have cast all their burdens upon the Lord into a congregation of distracted students and distracted professional people and burdened and worried mothers and everything else shall be that's something of enormous importance do not be feel do not be distracted do not be obsessional concentrate on today concentrate on the kingdom of

God and concentrate on prayer and then the peace of God that passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds let us pray oh Lord we ask the blessing of thy spirit so that we may see thy word with some clarity and see it in all the urgency of its application to our own lives oh Lord since thou dost never slumber nor sleep it is possible for us to sleep and may we know that sleep of contentment and that sleep of confidence that is the hallmark of thy church's faith for our saviour's sake amen