

Why Worry?

*Getting to the Heart
of Your Anxiety*



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of Your Anxiety

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Perhaps no single problem hampers more people than the problem of worry or anxiety. It can arise suddenly and plague us daily. It saps our sleep, drains our joy, and exhausts our energy. It clouds our thinking, wrecks our relationships, and aggravates our body ailments. While worry is chronic and crippling for some of us, it is an everyday annoyance for all of us.

Is there any hope for this common problem?

Popular answers to worry seem insufficient and sometimes even counterproductive. Some people might say, "Don't worry; most of what we worry about never comes to pass." But many of our concerns are very real. Some will come to pass. Others might say, "When you worry, think on positive things. Think good thoughts, not bad." But that is easier said than done when worrisome realities continually insert themselves into our minds. Still others opt for anxiety medication, but their worries remain even if their emotions are somewhat numbed. And the famous Grammy-Award-winning song by Bobby McFerrin, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," gives only inane reasons with no substance. The cultural solutions for the problems of worry, anxiety, and fear seem sadly simplistic.¹

In this booklet, we will explore the words of Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount. We will see the hope he provides for us when we worry, as well as what worry is and how we can overcome it. We will learn that worry is a sin that expresses various degrees of idolatry and unbelief, even among believers. Along the way, we'll look at the stories of Josh and Jessica—two worriers who turned to God amid their concerns and found comfort from him.

God Gives You Hope to Overcome Worry

Given the various methods that our culture recommends, and their inability to solve the problem of worry, what hope do we have? The answer is God and his Word. The Scriptures bring good news: worry is a solvable problem. Through his Word and his Spirit, God provides followers of Christ with the wisdom and power we need to fight against worry and overcome our anxiety. The Lord gives powerful counsel for this perennial problem.

What should we do with our worry? How should we handle its onset? Three times in Matthew 6:19–34, Jesus commands us not to worry: “I tell you: Don’t worry about your life” (v. 25); “So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” (v. 31); “Therefore don’t worry about

tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself' (v. 34). This detail alone breeds hope. The very fact that Jesus himself addresses worry means that God knows about this problem and that he has answers. We are not left to secular psychologies for answers to life's problems. The believer in Jesus does not need to depend on human opinions, theories, and techniques. We have the Bible to teach us how to handle worry. God himself guarantees help and hope to worriers like you and me.

Furthermore, the fact that Jesus addresses *his followers* also breeds hope. Why? Because it assures us that even Christians can struggle with worry. Even Christ's apostles experienced anxiety, and if they did, then the odds are high that we will also. God knows that. And, because he loves us, he wants to progressively liberate us from our worry. Our Lord's words here overflow with hope. Jesus says we can learn not to worry.

Worry Is Sinful, but Jesus Brings Grace

What does Jesus say about worry? He tells us that it is wrong. As we saw above, Jesus forbids it no fewer than three times in the same passage: "Don't worry." The apostle Paul gives a similar prohibition in Philippians 4:6: "Don't worry about anything." Worry, then, is sin.

Of course, calling worry a sin can immediately make us uncomfortable and can even invite resistance. But the Bible reminds us that any of our attitudes or actions that are contrary to God's commands, or that fall short of his will for us, are sin (see, for example, 1 Thess. 4:1–2; James 4:17; 1 John 3:4). This includes even those unconscious attitudes—such as worry—that we don't actively choose.

Why is worry sinful? After all, it is so common and natural—everybody does it. Besides, it shows that we are concerned about things in life. Surely it is better to worry a little than to be callous, indifferent, and apathetic to the world around us. We certainly don't want to suggest that we should be unconcerned about the people and things we value, so calling it “sinful” requires some explanation. In what sense is worry sinful?

English Bible translations rightly note that the Greek New Testament usually uses *worry* in a negative sense, but that the same word sometimes means “care” or “concern” in a positive sense.² The choice depends on the context. How do two senses emerge from the same root word? This observation suggests that worry is care or concern that gets out of control. In other words, virtually every expression of worry begins with some legitimate concern that we allow to consume us. We fail to bring that concern into God's presence in order to

see it from God's perspective. Worries are typically matters of concern that we fail to deal with in godly ways. Our matters of legitimate concern cross the line and become matters of sinful worry, anxiety, or fear.

Worry, like other problematic emotions (such as envy, anger, and despair), serves a revelatory function. It reveals the remaining double-mindedness within our souls. As we will see from Jesus's teaching, worry expresses our remaining inner pockets of idolatry and unbelief. Of course, this kind of sin is not one of simple volitional choice. We don't consciously choose to worry. It simply arises, contrary to our preferences and against our will. That is why people use the term *panic attack* to describe sudden, intense forms of worry. While nothing external actually attacks us, an inner surge of emotional fear seems to seize us against our will.

The fact that worry is sin, however, should not discourage us. Why? Because Jesus Christ came to deal with sin—with every form of sin, including our worry. He came to redeem and transform people like you and me, who worry. He came to live a life of perfect obedience to the will of his Father and, thereby, to earn for us and bestow upon us his perfect righteousness. By his death, resurrection, and ascension he has given new hope, new power, and new identity to all who trust in him. He came to forgive us for our worrying and to help us to

change our patterns. While God might not reverse the tough situations that you worry about, he specializes in pardoning, cleansing, and helping you. Amid difficult circumstances, he wants to change you.

What, then, is wrong with worry? Why is it sinful? Jesus Christ answers that question in Matthew 6:19–34. He does not merely prohibit worry; he gives us reasons why it is wrong. He exposes the sinful roots of our anxiety with two penetrating pictures of what it truly is. By understanding these two components of worry, we can begin to address them wisely.

Worry Is Idolatry; the Solution Is Repentance

We see, in Matthew 6:19–25, the first reason why worry is sin: Jesus tells us that worry is idolatry. Idolatry means worshiping someone or something other than the true and living God. It means giving yourself to some person, goal, ideal, or object other than Jesus. It involves hitching your heart to some false savior and refuge, exalting your personal desires above the Lord, serving some master other than God. Worry expresses lingering idolatry in the heart. It signals that in some way you are trusting in yourself—that you are building your life to some degree on things or people other than Jesus. Your anxiety automatically

indicates that your heart allegiances are temporarily divided.

In verse 25 Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry. . . .” His “therefore” points us back to the preceding context of verses 19–24. In this passage Jesus shows how idolatry competes with God in several ways.

Competing Possessions

Worry reveals ways that we inwardly seek and trust in competing earthly possessions instead of godly possessions. Jesus tells us to store up heavenly, imperishable treasures—not earthly, perishable treasures.

Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don’t break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19–21)

So many of our worries involve earthly things: our jobs, our marriages, our money, our possessions, our health, our children, and so on. We focus and fixate on them, we attach our heart to them, and then we live in perpetual worry about them. We anxiously wonder when,

how, if, or how soon these things will perish, fail, or collapse. After all, as Jesus tells us, they are moth-edible, rust-able, and steal-able. They are impermanent, subject to corrosion or theft. Nevertheless, they end up controlling our minds and actions. What we supremely value—what we live for—will rule our lives. Our treasure will control us.

In contrast, heavenly treasures are permanent—secured forever for us. They include every benefit found in Christ, every jewel of the rich inheritance that Jesus died to procure for us, his people. (Meditate on Ephesians 1:1–14 or 1 Peter 1:1–9, for example.) Ultimately, that highest treasure is God himself and his Son Jesus. “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Gen. 15:1 NIV). God says, “I am your treasure.” In the midst of his understandable fears, the psalmist Asaph concludes, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25–26 NIV). To see and be with God and the Lamb—in this life and forever—far outweighs and outshines the perishable trinkets we foolishly cherish.

Competing Eyes

Worry also reveals ways that we look at life with competing eyes. A good eye lets God’s