A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

MATTHEW 6:25-34

JESUS COUNSELS THE ANXIOUS

FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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MARCH 29, 2020 (AM)

INTRODUCTION

Problem

Let's be honest, we're all worried, aren't we? Some of us are worried about catching the coronavirus. All of us are worried about the economy and the impact on our jobs, our homes, our education, and our families. Even the most confident and hopeful of Christians have been shaken by this sudden turn of events. Worry stalks us and haunts us at various points of the day and night, and sometimes all day and all night.

Worry is not a pleasant experience, is it? Our thoughts go round the same things again and again, each time imagining worse and worse outcomes and results. Our minds become a "What-if Factory," playing out innumerable scenarios. "What if this….what if that…what if the next thing…" and on and on.

Worry > Anxiety>Stress Cycle

That then starts what's often known as the "Worry > Anxiety > Stress" cycle. Worry starts in our **thoughts**, but these worrying thoughts then produce anxious **feelings**. We feel fearful, hopeless, doomed. But it doesn't end there. Worried **thoughts** produce anxious **feelings** which then produce stresse **bodies**. We feel pains in our bodies, we're short of breath. We have headaches. We can't eat, we can't sleep. And these bodily pains and malfunctions, of course, make us think there's something seriously wrong with us, which gives us something else to worry about, and so the vicious cycle starts all over again!

Solution?

Does that sound like you and your life right now? The good news is that God knew this day was coming and has provided counsel for us to stop worry at its source. And if we can stop worry at its source, we can then stop the resulting anxiety and stress and live more peaceful and joyful lives, even in the midst of worrying times and events.

But before we look at God's counsel in Matthew 6:25-34, I just want to make three qualifications, so we don't misunderstand this passage.

THREE QUALIFICATIONS

Qualification 1: There is a difference between the worry/anxiety/stress that is a spiritual problem and the worry/anxiety/stress which is a physical or biological problem. If it's a spiritual problem, we need God's counsel. If it's a physical problem, we also may need medical counsel.

Qualification 2: This passage does not condemn **thinking** but **overthinking**. It does not forbid thinking about problems or even planning for the future, but rather obsessing about these things. The Greek expression behind "don't be anxious" means literally "don't divide and pull to pieces your own minds with tormenting cares."

Qualification 3: This is a lifelong battle for many of us. It's not once and done, but something we have to fight for much of our lives. Don't be disappointed and discouraged if you win this one day and then find you have to fight it again the next day. God may give you periods of victory, but he may call you into a lengthy battle too.

What's God's first counsel for us? He says, "Come outside with me."

1. JESUS COUNSELS WITH CREATION

Worry looks at the wrong things. In Jesus' day, they focused on what to eat, drink, and wear. Today, worry focuses on the news, our bank balance, our 401K, our house, our education, etc. If that's what fills your view, then you will be an extremely worried person in these days. But Jesus offers a different view. He takes us out into the creation and says, "Study the birds and the flowers."

Study the birds (26)

(26) Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. The birds don't plan, store up for the future, make projections, yet always have sufficient food. They start the day with singing and sing all day long. If God looks after the birds of heaven, will he not look after the heirs of heaven? Here is bird therapy! In theory, bird watchers should be the least anxious people.

Study the flowers (29)

He then turns our gaze from the sky to the fields, and says, ***"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (29).***

Many years ago, I was invited to my Seminary professor's house for an evening of fellowship with him, his wife, and other students. There was a beautiful vase of flowers on the table that someone had clearly spent a lot of time designing and arranging. As we sat down at the table to eat, there was an awkward silence, which I decided to break by asking my professor's wife, "Did you make that beautiful arrangement of flowers?" There was an even more awkward silence...eventually broken by my professor quietly confessing, "Actually I did the flowers." We were all a bit stunned and I must admit I never looked at him in quite the same way again. However, as the years passed, I came to realize that he was really just putting Matthew 6 into practice. His flower arranging hobby was really flower therapy. This was his way of considering the lilies of the field, how they grow.

APPLICATION

- We don't all need to buy binoculars and start bird-watching, or buy a vase and start start flower-arranging classes. These are just samples from creation. This passage encourages us to get out into God's creation, to stop, study, and think about it. Soak in the sights, delight in the sounds, take in the smells, savor the taste, feel the touch. Use the physical world to minister to your spiritual world. There's something about God's creation that produces peace and induces worship (Ps. 8).
- Even scientists are encouraging more time in the outdoors for our mental and emot-emotional health. That's one of the reasons why the government didn't shut the parks and encouraged walking outside even in these days. But Christians should get even more from creation therapy because we view it through the lens of God's creating power and providential care. If confined to the house, we can always watch nature films from National Geographic or the BBC.

PANIC SEES A GODLESS WORLD,
PEACE SEES A GOD-FILLED WORLD

Views of creation are great, but I've got lots of questions.
God answers our questions by asking us questions.

2. JESUS COUNSELS WITH QUESTIONS

When we worry, we ask ourselves, others, and even God, lots of questions. Will I have a job? How will I pay my mortgage? What about my education? Such questions can only multiply our worry, especially because we don't and can't know the answers at this time. That's why God comes to us with an alternative set of questions, questions that minister peace rather than worry. Let's look at five of these questions and how we should answer them.

Scripture	Question	Answer
Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? (25)	**How balanced are you?**	I confess that sometimes I value the supports of life more than life itself. I may not be able to buy the latest clothes or renew my wardrobe, but at least I have life and a body to clothe.
Are you not of more value than birds? (26)	**How valuable are you?**	The birds obviously matter a lot to God. He moves me to feed them. He will move others to help me, because I am much more valuable to him than the birds
Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? (27)	**How powerful are you?**	There are some things I can do, but many things I can't do. And one of the things I can't do is add an inch to my height, a day to my life, or a dollar to my bank account by worrying. I have no power to do that,
If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you? (30)	**How important are you?**	If God clothes little pieces of grass, he will clothe me. I'm far more important to him than blades of grass. If he puts such beauty on grass, he will put ordinary clothes on me?
Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. (31-32)	**How pagan are you?**	How different am I to the heathen in this situation? I'm not only losing my peace; I'm losing my testimony.

APPLICATION

Sometimes the best answers to our questions are God's questions. Spend time with these questions. Maybe write them out and carry them with you. Try to memorize them and when worry starts, challenge yourself with these questions

PANIC ASKS GOD QUESTIONS
PEACE LISTENS TO GOD'S QUESTIONS

Thanks for the questions, but I also need some answers.
That's why God takes us to two truths that will answer a lot of our questions.

3. JESUS COUNSELS WITH CONTROL

Worry trusts the wrong leaders. Who have you listened to most this past couple of weeks? President Trump? Governor Whitmer? Dr Fauci? Dr Birx? Sean Hannity? Jake Tapper? How much have you listened to God and trusted God?

The politicians, the scientists, the doctors, the media are all trying to capture our attention and communicate their control and grasp of the situation. But so is God, and he does so by bringing us two truths about himself.

I am your Father

"For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (32). If God was here today, he would say: "I'm your heavenly father. I gave you life and I care for your life. I know your name, your circumstances, and your needs. You aren't a vote or a statistic or an audience. You are my child. I love you. I'm present with you. I will never abandon you. I will always listen to you, sympathize with you, and seek your good." Here's a short answer to a ton of questions, isn't it? "I'm your Father."

I am your King

"Seek first the Kingdom of God" (33). God is saying to us today: I'm in control. I'm in charge. I rule over the coronavirus. I know where every single atom of this coronavirus is. I own everything. I can share my resources with you. I am moving this whole situation and unfolding it according to my perfect plan. Here's another three word answer to millions of questions: "I'm your King."

APPLICATION

- We earlier saw how God directs our attention to natural images, images of nature such as birds and grass. Here he directs us to supernatural images, images of God as Father and King. These are rich metaphors which we can explore in our minds. We're not short of such supernatural image therapy in the Bible: God is our Shepherd, our Fortress, our Rock, our Shield, our Tower, our Light, our Vine, and so on.
- Worship your way out of worry. Use these images not just to replace images of worry but to worship. As you think of God as Father, King, etc., praise God. Let worry lead you to worship God, and let worship lead you out of worry.

**PANIC TRUSTS HUMAN CONTROL,
PEACE TRUSTS GOD'S CONTROL**

**These are helpful truths and pictures of truth.
But what do I do now?**

4. JESUS COUNSELS WITH PRIORITIES

Panic sets the wrong priorities. In times of worry, we get focused on our little kingdoms: my future, my family's future. We perhaps see our kingdoms crumbling and we are totally focused on protecting and rebuilding them. But God comes along and says, “Here are your priorities now.”

Prioritize God's Kingdom

"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (33). A great promise is attached to this. “Do this thing, my kingdom things,” say God, “and all these things, your things will fall into the right place and be fine.” Kingdom concern is the remedy for money concern. This is not a promise of abundance but one of necessity. “These things” are the necessities of life, the basics of enough and sufficient. God’s basically saying, “If you take care of my interests, I’ll take care of yours.”

Prioritize today

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (34). Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.Instead of thinking most about tomorrow, think most about today. A day at a time. There’s enough trouble in today without taking tomorrow’s troubles into it.

APPLICATION

- Enter the kingdom first. Before you do anything else, surrender to the King and submit to his rule. This should be the most important and urgent concern in your life right now. Maybe God has done this to tear up your to-do list and give you his instead. Is he saying to you: “Re-order your priorities.”
- Seek God first thing in the morning, worship him first day in the week, give to him the first of your income, and the first of your talents and energies, not just the cold leftovers. Seek the salvation of your children above all else, If we asked our children “What do you think your parents want most for you?” would their answer be “The Kingdom.”

THE DEVIL’S TO-DO LIST STARTS WITH YOUR KINGDOM, BUT GOD’S TO-DO LIST STARTS WITH HIS KINGDOM.

Do you see how caring and compassionate God is?
Do you see how this would change your life?

CONCLUSION

Worry > Anxiety > Stress

- Not biological but spiritual
- Not thinking but overthinking
- Not one-off but lifelong

Jesus counsels with

- Creation
- Questions
- Control
- Priorities

Look at God's creation, listen to God's questions, rest in God's care & control, and follow God's priorities for peace instead of worry

FURTHER STUDY

Online Articles

- Anxiety and the Sovereignty of God (Tabletalk)
- Anxiety: my Thorn in the Flesh by Rachel Miller
- Anxious for Nothing by Jared Wilson.
- Never a Better Time for Family Prayer by Megan Hill.

Books

- Thinking Through Anxiety by Ryan Davidson
- Running Scared by Ed Welch
- Anxiety: Knowing God's Peace by Paul Tautges

Discussion Questions

1. What are your specific worries at this time? It's often a good idea to get them out of your head and on to a piece of paper.

2. What stage are you at in the Worry > Anxiety > Stress cycle?

3. What part of God's creation helps you with anxiety and why?

4. What are your answers to these questions:
- How balanced are you?
- How valuable are you?
- How powerful are you?
- How important are you?
- How pagan are you?

How do these questions and your answers help you to overcome worry and find peace?

5. What images (metaphors) of God are especially helpful to you and why?

6. Why does worship help us out of worry?

7. In what ways can you prioritize God's kingdom more in your life and your family's life?

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Worry > Anxiety > Stress

- Not biological but spiritual
- Not thinking but overthinking
- Not one-off but lifelong

Biblical answer?

THE DEVIL'S CALENDAR SAYS "TOMORROW"
BUT GOD'S CALENDAR SAYS "TODAY"

Look at God's creation,
listen to God's questions,
rest in God's care and control,
and follow God's priorities
to enjoy peace instead of worry.

Jesus counsels with creation

- Study the birds
- Study the flowers

PANIC SEES A GODLESS WORLD,
PEACE SEES A GOD-FILLED WORLD.

What about my questions?

Jesus counsels with questions

- How balanced are you?
- How valuable are you?
- How powerful are you?
- How important are you?
- How pagan are you?

PANIC ASKS GOD QUESTIONS,
PEACE LISTENS TO GOD'S QUESTIONS.

What about some answers?

Jesus counsels with care and control

- I'm your Father
- I'm your King

PANIC TRUSTS HUMAN CONTROL,
PEACE TRUSTS GOD'S CONTROL

What can I do now?

Jesus counsels with priorities

- Prioritize God's Kingdom
- Prioritize today

THE DEVIL'S TO-DO LIST STARTS
WITH YOUR KINGDOM.
GOD'S TO -DO LIST STARTS
WITH HIS KINGDOM

Action?